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# ***Lives at the Border***

***Abandonment and Survival at the frontier of Lampedusa***

Alessandro Corso

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)  
Department of Anthropology  
Durham University

2019

## Abstract

Lampedusa is primarily portrayed as a European border which has been subjected to intense surveillance and securitisation. On the other hand, it is also the stage for various humanitarian interventions. Apart from being a spectacularized frontier, this dissertation shows how life in Lampedusa unfolds, through stories of cooperation and mutuality between the migrants, locals and migration workers in the context of acute abandonment. By describing their tendency to struggle for a sense of wellbeing, the thesis argues against a simplistic notion of bare life, based on a reductive imagery of the migrant, and it provides the ethnographic and theoretical instruments to critically engage with philosophical reflections by means of anthropology. Based on an eleven-month period of ethnographic fieldwork in Lampedusa, the dissertation explores the triangulated intersection of lives that is at play among migration workers, locals, and migrants. It examines their daily encounters, and it gives an insight into the hardship of the locals' lives, their feelings towards migrants and the role of profit. Lampedusa can be defined as being simultaneously a borderland space, state of emergency, and realm of the absurd, where its multiple subjects, albeit in various forms, struggle to attain a balance between what they ought to do and what they can and cannot do. In transient conditions of indifference and acceptance, uncertainty and endurance, migrants, migration workers, and locals negotiate a resolution to what at times appears to be an irresolvable existential conundrum. Hence, this thesis explores humanness *vis-a-vis* self-interest and mutual sharing in borderlands, at geographical, historical, legal, social, and ethical boundaries.

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## Statement of copyright

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‘One thing must be said, time goes by, and within the past two thousand years, the primary problem of humanity is to love each other. Yet, loving each other has become much more urgent than it used to be, and when we hear that we must love one another, we know that we don’t have much time left. We must hurry up, we must begin to love. We always love too little, and too late...’

Roberto Benigni, *I Dieci Comandamenti* (Cervellati 2015).



## Acknowledgments

*Nothing comes from nothing. This Thesis tells a story, and yet, it is its own story, made up of eventful moments, unexpected encounters, and often unimaginable twists and developments along the way, at least for me.*

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## Dedication

To those who seem to have no face



‘The faceless boy.’ Oil painting on canvas. Alessandro Corso 2016.

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# Introduction

## Existential situations in borderland Lampedusa

Lampedusa, an island South of Sicily, 30 August 2016. Following the extraordinary migrant landing of 1273 people on the island, the local poet, artist, and storyteller Giacomo Sferlazzo, writes a post on Facebook:

*'Military planes and helicopters fly over Lampedusa  
War in Libya  
People running away  
Commerce of men and women  
Exploitable workers  
Slaves  
Heroes  
Military personnel saving human lives...  
The sun is still out  
Summer will last a long time this year  
A pistacchio ice cream  
A lemon granita  
Before the end of humanity'<sup>1</sup>*

Reflecting on his post, I contemplated, is the end of humanity nigh? Wars are perpetrated, and agreements are reached among European governments and Libyan authorities on who will stop, by legalized forms of detention and torture, the so called 'people on the move.' In 2016 Italy was going to stipulate political agreements with Libyan authorities. Their aim would be to collaborate on the *battle* against undocumented migration in the Mediterranean. Their resolution was to reduce the perimeter of violence and death from the Mediterranean Sea to the Libyan coasts. The migrants who landed in Lampedusa testified to the violence perpetrated on the other shore of the Mediterranean. In the meantime, as Giacomo Sferlazzo writes, life in Lampedusa kept going as usual... Lampedusa is a land where the basic needs of citizens — such as being healthy, having fun, smiling and celebrating — are met in a reality which is too ruthless to be easily accepted and too heavy to digest. Observing these contradictions in my experience I felt chained, trapped, constantly on the alert, forced to remember that, whether I liked it or not, shit does go on, and that we're all part of it. Life on Lampedusa is difficult, on a constant edge between the idea of freedom and the awareness of being prisoners. Prisoners in the sea of reality which breaks continuously against the shore of our conscience where we walk, run in fear, we silently observe, and we jump into. Everyone reacts differently to the sea, and each one of us learns its lessons (Fieldnotes 30/08/16).

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<sup>1</sup> My translation from Italian

It is precisely on these ‘all too human,’ similar and different ways of reacting, resisting, reproducing, and reconstituting *lifeworlds*<sup>2</sup> in borderland situations that I dwell on in this ethnography. This thesis is on the ambiguities of life in borderlands; the struggles, fears, hopes, and attitudes of migrants, migration workers, and locals who lived on the island of Lampedusa, door to Europe and frontier of undocumented migration. It examines their gestures, silences, thoughts and attitudes from an existential<sup>3</sup> perspective, giving resonance to the uncertain, contradictory, and doubtful character of life in Lampedusa. What remains unexplored in existing scholarship are the spaces where these various subjects (migrants, migration workers, and locals) encounter each other and/or maintain a distance from each other. This thesis thereby provides a comprehensive, ethical, critical, and phenomenological<sup>4</sup> analysis of the effects of undocumented migration on locals, migration workers, and migrants’ everyday lives. It does so through an examination of the historical context of the island of Lampedusa as a gateway to Europe, and its social spaces of abandonment, indifference, profit making and reciprocity. The work presents the island within and beyond the theatrical stage of humanitarianism and securitarianism (Fassin and Pandolfi 2010). Lampedusa can then be defined as being at the same time borderland space, state of emergency, and realm of the absurd, where its multiple subjects, albeit in various forms, struggle to attain a balance between what they ought to do and what they can and cannot do. In transient conditions of indifference and acceptance, uncertainty and endurance, migrants, migration workers, and locals, negotiate a resolution to what at times appears an irresolvable existential conundrum. Hence, this thesis explores humanness *via-a-vis* self-interest and mutual sharing in borderlands, at the geographical, historical, legal, social, and ethical boundaries.

For David Carrasco (1992), frontiers are ambiguous zones where migrants, border agents, locals, but also researchers experience an existential tension or struggle, from different perspectives and for multiple reasons. It thus follows that ‘the borderlands suggest sites of intransitive, unstable, and intersubjective meanings that call into question the kind of reductive and essentializing language that makes human experience appear to be coterminous with the conventional categories’ deployed by these images at the frontier (Jackson 2008: 124). Influenced by this reading on the borderlands, the thesis explores Lampedusa as a borderland space, and ambiguous frontier not merely from a geographical and political perspective. The borderland defines the existential situation of tension, of

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2 When I use *lifeworlds*, I deploy Jackson’s notion of the term as a complex, dynamic, and often hard to grasp space of intersubjectivity, or a ‘constellation of both ideas and passions, moral normal and ethical dilemmas’ (Jackson 2013b: 7), thought, and praxis, which the terms ‘culture’ or ‘society’ may fail to address.

3 Existentialism is the understanding of human beings as both singular and same, as potentially capable of endurance and hope, indifference and fear.

4 I understand phenomenology as an approach to the world we study that focuses on how lived experience replicates or transcends the way we attempt to rationally and objectively determine ‘reality’. Phenomenology allows us to explore the transformative and intersubjective relations between categories, roles, and stereotypes, and the various experiences of the people who live through them.

struggling to find a meeting point or a balance within a condition of being at the limit between indifference, reciprocity self-interest, and recognition of others as human beings.

‘People on the move’ keep dying in the Mediterranean Sea, which has become a cemetery of missing migrants. (Albahari 2015). Meanwhile, in Lampedusa, the old cemetery gate-keeper Vincenzo has been speaking to journalists from all over the world since the early 2000s. The migrants who survived the Sea crossing and reached Lampedusa are witnesses of violence, torture, death, and unjustified crimes. For many of them, survival was about endurance in their new living space. Some locals struggled to acknowledge the migrants as equals, fearing that Lampedusa would soon be turned into a land populated by Africans. On the other hand, there were other inhabitants of the island who could not resist helping migrants, even when doing so went against the rules of the Centro di Primo Soccorso e Accoglienza (CPSA),<sup>5</sup> or the opinion of other *Lampedusani*.<sup>6</sup> These moments of vitality, manifestations of hope, mixed with frustration, absence, and a sense of unsoundness<sup>7</sup>, constitute the founding elements of this thesis.

In past decades, the phenomenon of undocumented migration has been represented from multiple and conflicting perspectives through a widespread collection of photographic material, documentary films, and artwork. Academics, journalists, artists, and film-makers focused on the most politicized frontiers of the world, from Lesbos (Greece) to Jordan, from the US-Mexico border to Melilla and Ceuta (Spanish territories). They have made the border tangible, the experiences of the migrants audible, and they turned the complexities of life in borderlands into their central object of investigation. As this phenomenon grew, political concerns for the issue of controlling, monitoring, handling, and attempts to manage the issue of clandestine migration intensified. Statistical analysis of the percentages of arrivals, repatriations, rescues, deaths, and missing migrants has grown drastically in the past decades. Worldwide, some of the most powerful countries in the world have declared that walls, barbed wire, and highly technological defence mechanisms must be employed to safeguard the wellbeing of their people, at the expenses of untrustworthy migrants, depicted as invaders, impostors, diseased, terrorists, or rapists. (Lucht 2011; Ravenda 2012; De Michelis 2017). In the light of a growing concern for the issue of undocumented migration worldwide, we may have an extensive knowledge of the percentages of people on the move and the budget which governments spend to monitor, protect, and survey the Mediterranean Sea, the Macedonian borders, or the US-Mexico frontier (Albahari 2015). Yet, up to the present time, we generally have a poor understanding of how such phenomena impact on the people who inhabit borderlands, generating particular kinds

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<sup>5</sup> First Welcoming Centre.

<sup>6</sup> Plural name for people from Lampedusa

<sup>7</sup> I use the term ‘unsoundness’ drawing from the notion of the absurd, as it is used in Samuel Beckett’s *Theatre of the Absurd*. Unsoundness conveys the absence of balance, of harmony, or reasonability, expressed by many migration workers, migrants, and locals, in their attempts to understand the logics according to which the system of undocumented migration works and affects them.

of *lifeworlds*. In response to it, this thesis thus poses the following questions: how do rescuers and doctors, migrants and locals, reproduce or resist the narratives of the border? How do they daily replicate, question, and exceed the roles they have, the rules they are called on to follow, and the labels they have been given?

If much of the research addressing the phenomenon of undocumented migration has made the migrant and the ‘migrant experience’ its favourite object of research, with the risk of falling into an ‘epistemic violence, reducing a wide array of people to an ethnographic gaze beholden to a state-centric vision’ (Andersson 2012: 25), this thesis reveals how categories or labels attached to the figure of the ‘migrant,’ the ‘local,’ or the ‘migration worker,’ provide a slippery, partial, and reductive understanding of lived experience (Jackson 2008).<sup>8</sup> It examines how the inhabitants of Lampedusa respond to the contingencies of living in borderland situations, revealing where they differ, but also exploring their points of convergence. It departs from the official representation of the migrant, the migration worker, and the Lampedusano, to ethnographically show where the mainstream media and political representation of life at the borderland reveals, hides, or leaves in a grey area their voices, needs, and concerns (Andersson 2014). In sum, the thesis seeks to show how complicated the spectacle of the borderland of Lampedusa is, revealing the island as a tragic space or a land of genuine hospitality (Cuttitta 2012). Drawing from the scholarship of existential anthropology, and its consideration of intersubjectivity [which teaches us the impossibility of reducing subjectivity to roles, rules, and fixed categories (Jackson 2008)], it shows the ways in which migration workers, migrants, and locals’ subjectivities transcend fixed roles.

Within the broader aims and objectives of this thesis, gender limitations cannot be overlooked and underestimated but shall be addressed at the outset. Lampedusa has an area of 20.2 kilometres and a population of about 6,000 people. Many of the young inhabitants live elsewhere in Sicily and the rest of Italy, mainly for studying and working purposes. The majority of the remaining inhabitants are therefore elderly people. Elderly men are mostly sailors and fishermen, and elderly women mostly housewives and used to work in local fish factories when young, together with children. I was twenty-five years old when I began fieldwork, and my grandfather was a fisherman from a small fishing community in Sicily. As a result, elderly men seemed to be much more interested in entertaining conversations with me than were women. Furthermore, while elderly men tend to gather together during the morning and the afternoon in cafes, most elderly women tend to spend less time in public settings and were not particularly keen on establishing relationships with ‘*straneri*’ (non-Lampedusani). Despite such limitations, women played a fundamental role in my work. One of the

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<sup>8</sup> Following Davis’ (1977) considerations on the worrying scarcity of in-depth studies on migration in the Mediterranean region, particular interest has been directed towards what is commonly referred to as ‘illegal immigration’, preferably defined as ‘undocumented immigration’, following the critical reflection of Del Lago (1998). I use the term ‘migrants’ to refer to both (economic) migrants and (forced) migrants or asylum seekers, as these are ‘literally on the same smuggler boat’ (Albahari 2015: 10).



ethnographically most critical moments of this thesis is inspired to Mrs. Maria (Chapter VI), who I met because of Vincenzo, the old cemetery gatekeeper. The above and other ethnographic moments I address in the thesis (Chapter II, Chapter III, and Chapter V) demonstrate that the work does not exclude women's voices *a priori*, neither it reflects poor interest of the researcher to address them.

Among the migrants I was able to speak to, I had nearly no access to women. The ratio of men versus women among the migrants in Lampedusa is extraordinarily large, and most of the women who land on the island, do not exit the CPSA. Furthermore, women are often victims of sexual abuse and torture. Religious and cultural dynamics where intimacy and a sense of shame for one's experiences of violence may be kept inside and very hardly communicated to a young male stranger, may have also played a role in producing a distance between us. Yet, I have always tried to both not impose my research ethical issues onto the women I met, and when I have felt reluctance or a sense of discomfort, I limited myself to accept it. What I felt I could do was observing and writing my impressions. I did so, and tried, with the help of fragments of stories, glances, and at times even silences, to reflect on the nature of those existential situations; on what made each experience so personal and so similar to one another. Doing so required, at least at times, to keep a certain distance.

## The Borderland of Lampedusa

'Listen, listen, listen!' Giacomo<sup>9</sup> beats the tambourine once. 'Listen, listen, listen!' He beats the tambourine a second time. 'By the will of his Majesty Ferdinand II of Bourbons.' He beats the tambourine a third time. 'The governor Bernardo Maria San Vicente is recruiting families, men and women, to colonize and to harvest the lands of Lampedusa and Linosa.'<sup>10</sup> Giacomo beats the tambourine one more time. He then howls to the audience: 'Listen, listen, listen!' (Fieldnotes 03/06/16).

With these words, local artist Giacomo Sferlazzo introduced on stage the moment when Lampedusa officially passed from the Tomasi family to the Bourbons. It was the 22nd September 1843. From that time, Lampedusa became a colony, mainly inhabited by peasants and artisans mostly coming from Sicily. Its geographical position, between Sicily and North Africa, made it a central point of seclusion and exile both in 1872, when the government decided to build prisons called 'cameroni' (literally 'big rooms') to detain criminals and other unwelcome people. During the fascist period, the island became one of the 'remote places' (together with Pantelleria, Ustica, Ventotene, Tremiti, Ponza

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<sup>9</sup> Giacomo Sferlazzo is an artist, musician, poet, and storyteller from Lampedusa.

<sup>10</sup> Linosa is one of the Pelagic islands, which together with the island of Lampedusa constitutes the *comune* di Lampedusa e Linosa (A *comune* is a basic administrative division in Italy, which provides many of the basic civil functions). The island of Linosa is 42 kilometers away from Lampedusa, and it counts less than five hundred inhabitants.

and others) where ‘confinati politici,’<sup>11</sup> homosexuals, and people whom the Fascist regime considered a threat were sent. However, it was not until the recent phenomenon of clandestine migration that Lampedusa began to figure in national and international political agendas. Before its name became a synonym for the frontier in the Mediterranean, Lampedusa hardly figured in newspapers, history books, or geographical maps.<sup>12</sup> Lampedusa was called the “the rock” because it was an emerged land within a very large portion of the Mediterranean Sea, far from the Sicilian coasts, and nearly isolated from the rest of the world until the 1980s and 1990s. When tourism developed, the rock quickly turned into a “paradise” for tourists, and a “promised land” for many migrants in peril at sea.

There is a quite telling anecdote in this regard. Jacopo, a Lampedusano in his eighties, told me that in the 1960s, when he was doing military service in Turin, the official who had to grant him permission to return home for holidays, knew nothing about his homeland.

‘Lampedusa?’, the general said to Jacopo. ‘And where is it?’

Jacopo remarked that when he wanted to show the general where Lampedusa was, he found out that there was nothing but a nameless dot indicating Lampedusa on the geographical map of Italy hanging in the general’s office. ‘Only a dot’ Jacopo repeated to me, bitterly. Many years later, the name of Lampedusa is often mentioned in the European Parliament, addressed on TV shows, discussed by artists, and deployed by Humanitarian Organizations all over the world. Lampedusa appears today ‘not only in the Italian but also in the European imaginary — as the incarnation of the idea of the border, as the quintessence of the frontier’ (Cuttitta 2012: 11) [My Translation]. Its name is unquestionably fixed to migrant landings, rescue operations, and tragic events, like the death of 366 migrants on 3rd October 2013. As a consequence of these tragic and exceptional moments, captured by cameras and digitalized for a global audience, Lampedusa is not a ‘dot’ without a name in the Mediterranean. Rather, it has become an ideal observatory for the multiple phenomena concerning clandestine migration, capturing the interest of researchers, journalists, artists, film-makers, politicians, and even celebrities. For example, on Bruno’s kitchen wall, (a Lampedusano and former chef who worked on cruise boats across the Atlantic), there was a picture of Angelina Jolie during her visit to Lampedusa with UNHCR chief Guterres in summer 2011. Bruno was excited about that picture. Angelina Jolie had come to visit them. ‘Was it not great?’ he said.

In 2013, following the shipwreck of 3rd October, Pope Francis chose to conduct his first Pastoral Visitation to Lampedusa, reflecting upon the phenomenon as a further manifestation of the

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11 Political exile. *Confinio* (Internal Exile) is the term indicating the process of sending to exile intellectuals and political figures considered as political threats for the Fascist regime in Italy.

12 Writer Ludovico Ariosto made Lampedusa the stage for a battle between Christians and Saracens in its epical poem *L’Orlando Furioso* (The Frenzy of Orlando), written in the beginning of the 16th century. Several travelers wrote about the beauty of the island, its prosperous vegetation, and the recurrent figure of a hermit who hosted Christians and Muslims alike, from the ‘hermit of *Lampoza*’ of 15th century, to ‘Friar Clemente’ in 19th century. However, few people knew about it in Italy, and also among the inhabitants of Lampedusa who often dismissed the rich history of the island.

rich world's lack of concern for others' suffering, which he defined as 'the globalisation of indifference.' In his speech, the Pope spoke of the 'selfish attitude of indifference' as a problem which people, especially the 'relatively healthy and comfortable' ones, 'need to confront.' The extent to which all inhabitants of Lampedusa, migrants, migration workers, and locals, reproduced and rejected what Pope Francis referred to as 'the globalisation of indifference', is the primary concern in my last chapter, and to a larger extent in the whole thesis. However, before addressing such concerns, it is necessary to understand that the production of indifference was paradoxically the outcome of a particular kind of political and economic interest/absence for the island of Lampedusa. The popularity of the island grew under certain conditions of a particular imagery.

As the name of Lampedusa became embedded with the phenomenon of undocumented migration, the island was globally known as a borderland, a frontier between North Africa and Europe, between the Western society and the Middle Eastern world. It turned into a space that governments needed to control, monitor, protect, and depict in accordance to their priorities (Gatta 2012). Laws changed, political agreements determined different approaches to welcoming migrants, rescuing human lives, monitoring the entrance of terrorist, checking their medical conditions, or ensuring that they were not lying (See Ravenda 2012; Fassin and D'Halluin 2005; De Michelis 2017). Classification, categorization, and determination of fixed parameters delimiting the difference between an 'asylum seeker,' a 'refugee,' or an 'economic migrant' became a fundamental process through which people's presence in European countries could be legally obtained, questioned, or rejected (Lucht 2011). The tendency to find quick, functional, and objective criteria for administering a phenomenon, or a 'human flow' (Weiwei 2018), which is fostered by fear, death, violence, and hope for a better life, found expression in the theatre of the borderland. As a consequence of the *theatrilization* of the frontier, and its digitalized representation, reality could be effectively introduced to the global audience as if it were a tv show, a movie, or anything which could possibly be contained by the restrictive form of the media (Andersson 2014). As De Genova (2004) argues in his work on US-Mexico borders, the *spectacularization* of the border is a process which aims at undermining the historicity and identity of individual migrants by constituting a commonplace, generalized and stereotyped version of a migrant. The metaphor of the theatre has been copiously deployed by researchers in both American and Italian literature. Sossi argues that politics 'makes frontiers spectacular while producing them *ad hoc*' (Sossi 2006: 60) [My translation]. Cuttitta (2012) states that the constitution of the borderland of Lampedusa was the result of political and human processes which also turned it into a 'theatrical space', an ideal 'stage' for representing tragic moments, heroic gestures, humanness, and protection of the borders from possible dangerous others (Albahari 2015). Visits by celebrities, politicians, and religious figures like the Pope, were embedded

into the ‘spectacle of clandestine migration.’ They could be inscribed within ‘acts’ (Cuttritta 2012: 91) that is, particular historical, political and economic moments according to which Lampedusa appeared to follow specific narratives, which ultimately moved across two rhetorical frameworks: protecting the borders and saving human lives. Cuttritta analyses how the phenomenon of clandestine migration transformed over time, according to the succession of governments, implementation of laws regulating irregular migration, and global political attitudes towards the issue. From 2004 to 2011, he sketches five ‘acts’ of the ‘spectacle of the border’: ‘Firmezza’ (Firmness), ‘Umanità’ (Humanity), ‘Emergenza’ (Emergency), ‘Immigrazione Zero’ (Zero immigration), and ‘Emergenza Bis’ (Emergency bis).

The use of the term ‘emergency’ needs further clarification. An emergency calls for the suspension of regular, ordinary, activities; for example, when a migrant boat calls for help at sea, it constitutes an emergency call to which the Coast Guard must respond. When rescue operations fail, and hundreds of people drown off the shores of Lampedusa, as happened on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October 2013, it is considered an emergency. When the CPSA hosts thousands of migrants, although it can only provide for about three hundred people, it is an emergency. When someone dies of cancer on the island because there is no hospital, and they are unable to afford a plane and accommodation in Palermo, Catania, Rome, Turin, or Milan, this also constitutes an emergency. Yet, as Agamben (2003) reminds us, the term ‘emergency’ is often misused, becoming a deliberate ploy to draw people’s attention to a particular accident, tragedy, or dramatic event. By doing so, as this thesis will discuss, the complex web of power dynamics, dysfunctional politics, and forms of local and global business that grow out of such tragedies often gets lost in the midst of people’s sense of shame (Fassin and Pandolfi 2010). It is through these lenses that the term should be read each time I use it in the text. Let’s now go back to the five acts of the border spectacle described by Cuttritta (2013).

In the first act, ‘Firmezza’, the Italian government and the mainstream media portrayed Lampedusa as a ‘solid frontier’, where repatriation of most undocumented migrants took place. The frontier then assumed the characteristic of a barrier protecting Europe from illegal invaders. (Andrijašević 2006; Cole and Sally 2006; Albahari 2015). In the fifth and last act, ‘Emergenza bis,’ humanitarian and securitarian discourses intertwine. Following the Arab Springs in 2011, thousands of Tunisians travelled to Lampedusa, taking advantage of the critical political situation in their country and the reduced policing of the frontiers. The island counted more than six thousand migrants. The Italian government declared that the Temporary Stay centres in Italy could not host the migrants, calling for a state of emergency, and hoping that the EU would help with transferring the migrants across other European countries. Lampedusa would soon be known for its inhospitality and violence. In September 2011, when a group of Tunisians gathered by the fuel pump to protest against the Italian

government, chaos broke out. Some Lampedusani, together with Police Officers, fearing that the migrants were going to set fire to the fuel pump, attacked them with sticks and rocks. The images of the violent scenes became viral on TV and the Internet. However, two years later, following the shipwreck of 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2013, the register of the narration would change again. 366 people had drowned off the shores of Lampedusa. The inhabitants of the island suffered greatly from that event. The government declared a state of emergency in Lampedusa once again; and when Giusi Nicolini became the mayor of the island, the narrative changed once again; that the EU must contribute to a common cause with Italy: prioritizing human lives and fighting the industry of clandestine migration.

Lampedusa thus appeared to a national and global audience from different perspectives. Each ‘act’ of the ‘spectacle’ showed, hid, and differently represented some or other aspects of the complex phenomenon of clandestine migration. Much, however, was deliberately left to one side: the locals’ needs, the migrants’ most urgent concerns, and the migration workers’ uncertainties on how to handle particular situations were only quickly touched on. They were encapsulated into a digital world made out of short videos and photographs broadcasted on TV and spreading across the Internet, that presented an often superficial and incomplete version of lived experience in the borderlands. The phenomenon of clandestine migration was ultimately a business, an ‘illegal industry’, as Andersson named it, which disposed of migrants’ bodies, of their life and death, to reinforce the barriers of separation between legal and illegal subjects (Bauman 2004).

Furthermore, the very objective of justifying the whole system regulating the phenomenon of clandestine migration — the fight against irregular migration and the administration of the ‘people on the move’ in the respect of human rights — clashed with the contradictory workings of what Andersson referred to as the ‘illegal industry.’ ‘The workings of the illegality industry’ Andersson argues, ‘are absurd’ (Andersson 2014: 573). The absurd character nurturing that phenomenon of undocumented migration has one ultimate result: ‘Attempts to combat illegality only generate more illegality’ (Ibid: 574). Absurd here does not concern the irrationality of the mechanisms determining, representing, and fostering one or another aspect of the phenomenon of undocumented migration, but rather it refers to the overall failure of the system, which deploys huge amounts of money, effort, and manpower to foster human suffering, and enlarge the discrepancies between legal and illegal, making the border ‘as tall as a fence and as deep as the sea’ (Andersson 2014: 33). By doing so, the illegal industry of migration makes use of rescuers, migrants, locals, doctors, and of its audience, representing people’s lives as if they were sketches of a spectacle, and dismissing their everyday uncertainties, doubts, ethical dilemmas, and hopes, for the sake of profit.

I will examine the role of profit, and the impact that the business in which the industry of migration sinks its roots, how it has contaminated and transformed people’s views of the world and

their position in relation to others. Over time, the workings of the illegal industry not only affect those watching, but, most importantly, they had an impact on the inhabitants of the borderlands. Some were temporary passengers, like the many undocumented migrants, people on the move, who crossed deserts and navigated the Mediterranean Sea. Others, like the migration workers, experienced the border as a line separating two worlds: Lampedusa as a touristic island and a marvellous resort on the one hand, and Lampedusa as a space of pain, suffering and injustice, on the other. Although the Hotspot<sup>13</sup> in Lampedusa became a space of detention and the Favalaro pier, where most migrant landings take place, was turned into a militarized area with very restricted access, the worlds of undocumented migrants and of legal citizens often intertwined. As this thesis reveals, it was an ‘intransitive’, ‘intersubjective’, and ‘unstable’ space of encounter, clash, misunderstanding, and miscomprehension (Jackson 2008: 378). The ‘spectacle of the border’, however, moved across the two main narratives of the securitarian and the humanitarian discourse (Fassin and Pandolfi 2010; Ben-Yohayada 2016).

The images of rescuing agents in biohazard suit and the videos of migrants in peril at sea broadcasted by the media tended to simplify the complexities and contradictions characterizing the ‘illegal industry’. Furthermore, they reduced people’s experiences into simplistic categories: the migrant and the rescuer, the legal and the illegal. These labels became a reason of interest for both politicians and academics, whose attempts to expand knowledge on migration, often reproduced and reinforced such categories.

## Migration in context

In 2016, Gianfranco Rosi directed ‘Fuocoammare’ (Fire at Sea), a documentary film about the phenomenon of undocumented migration in Lampedusa, and winner of the Golden Bear in Berlin. Rosi’s work presents two distinctive narratives. The first is that of a solitary and deserted island. The second shows the rescue operations and in some scenes, the arrival of migrants in Lampedusa; the Italian film director chose to film the corpses retrieved at sea with the authorization of the Italian Navy and the Coast Guard.

Rosi’s work was shown in Lampedusa on April 2016, in via Roma, in front of the elementary school. There were several thousand people watching. A group of undocumented migrants was also there. I heard a local lady making a comment on the scene where doctors checked the migrants’ hands on landing, loudly explaining to her daughter, saying: ‘You see. They are checking if they [the

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<sup>13</sup> ‘Hotspots’ (first reception facilities) ‘aim to better coordinate EU agencies’ and national authorities’ efforts at the external borders of the EU, on initial reception, identification, registrations and fingerprinting of asylum-seekers and migrants’ (European Parliament 2018:1).

migrants] have scabies.’ In the meantime, a group of migrants who exited the CPSA were standing behind me. Along with Alfio, a member of MH, I checked how they were. Alfio told me that one of the Sub-Saharan African women was covering her face repeated times when she saw the images of dead migrants retrieved by rescue boats. The other Sub-Saharan migrants, all young men, were standing behind me, frowning while watching the movie.

The documentary film ‘Fuocoammare’ has become one of the most iconic representations of Lampedusa worldwide in recent years. Yet, it depicts a disjointed reality: the suffering and painful world of vulnerable migrants in peril at sea, and the remote life of locals, depicted as laidback inhabitants of a lonely land. It shows them as if they have never met. It depicts them with stereotyped images, the vulnerable migrant and the laidback inhabitant of Lampedusa, providing inadequate historical, political, and social background. On the one hand, the documentary film gave greater publicity about Lampedusa to the world. Everyone knew about the ‘tiny Italian island’, as BBC reports often referred to it (Boelpaep 2013; Kirby 2016). However, what did the world know about it? The dead bodies of migrants were shown to the audience as if they were objects to be displayed. Such a display of images is recurrent in the representation of undocumented migration in the Mediterranean. The image of Alan Kurdi, a Syrian child who died at two, drowning in the Mediterranean Sea, spread across the social media, national and international news in 2015, and became a symbol of the inhumane suffering of refugees in the Mediterranean. Although the photograph of the dead child captured the attention of the media, calling for a moral and human responses to an emergency, people on the move, boat people, refugees, and economic migrants, kept crossing the Mediterranean Sea, and they kept dying. I must add that this is still happening as I write. The image of Alan Kurdi ultimately reinforced the stereotypes of Syrians as refugees, vulnerable, and in need of help, while leaving the political responsibility of governments unquestioned. The use of strong images, like the one of the dead child, ultimately strips people of their lived experiences, their historical, social, cultural, and personal identity. As Mookherjee argues in her critical evaluation of the production of national and cosmopolitan mobilities in relation to the Help Bangladesh concert held in New York’s Madison Square Gardens in 1971, ‘to appeal to the cosmopolitan outlook of the global civil society, the politics and history of the Bangladesh have to be... encapsulated in the apolitical but affective image of the starving emancipated child standing in for the Bangladeshi nation.’ (Mookherjee 2011: 402). As a result, even the concept of cosmopolitanism, which academics tend to discuss as the principle upon which we are all human, equal, and the same, has often become an instrument for categorizing others as poor, vulnerable suffering beings.

Clearly enough, addressing the theme of undocumented migration inevitably carries its challenges and risks. Much has been written on clandestine migration as an industry, a state apparatus,

a process of inclusive exclusion of the other, and a state of exception which ultimately tends to dehumanize migrants. Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (1998) wrote of ‘states of exception’ as ambiguous spaces which defined themselves by the suspension of the law as a consequence of a compelling necessity. The state of exception, Agamben (1998) argued, finds its most telling historical example in the Holocaust, when people began considering other people as inferior human beings who deserved to be reported to authorities, and sent away to their destiny. The Jewish and other Holocaust prisoners’ lives, although excluded from the law, were still subjected to sovereign power. In a similar way to the Ancient Roman figure of the *homo sacer* (sacred man), their lives were caught in an ambiguous legal, political, and existential state of in-betweenness (Agamben 2003). Half man, half animal, Agamben writes, because they fully belonged to the sovereign power and lived within the system, but they did so by the neglect of the most basic human rights. They were ‘bare lives’, in the sense that their identity was negated, and their lives reduced to an insignificant legal and political level.

If the *homo sacer* is the one who can be killed without punishment, and the ‘bare life’ is the condition experienced by the *homo sacer*, the state of exception defines the open and unpredictable situation where a human life can be turned into an ambiguous kind of life. In the state of exception anything can happen. For Agamben, the space opening up as a consequence of the state of exception is the ‘camp’ — ‘an apparently innocuous space... in which the normal order is *de facto* suspended and in which whether or not atrocities are committed depends not on law but on the civility and the ethical sense of the police who temporarily act as sovereign’ (Agamben 1998: 174). The Mediterranean soon became an ideal space to criticise Agamben’s notion of the ‘camp’ (Lucht 2011). In the Mediterranean Sea migrants have been dying since the 1990s. The number of their deaths is still uncertain, because many of the boat people who get lost at sea are never retrieved. When their corpses are found, they are at times unrecognizable, because the sea water has deteriorated their features. Even if they are recognizable, they are often however buried in cemeteries, such as the one in Lampedusa, where they have no names, dates, or any sign of recognition. The ‘bareness’ of their lives emerges in the unrecognizable graves, in the global political absence regarding their daily deaths at sea, and in the indefinite life stories they carry with them. In the thesis, I do not disagree with Agamben’s critique of the *homo sacer*, which I corroborate with my ethnographic findings. Rather, I want to push Agamben’s argument further, leaving behind a negative bare life and showing instead how ‘bareness’ is about agency and patience, categorization and possibility to transcend politically, legally or economically construed expectations of what some people may be capable of achieving in a given situation. Let’s take the particular case of Lampedusa and briefly outline how Agamben’s paradigm can illuminate, but only partially, the ethnographic material.



On the one hand, the system of first reception, identification and possible expulsion characterizing the phenomenon of welcoming migrants to the island of Lampedusa, embodies a state of exception, where a specific legal condition of ‘rights’ has been *de facto* suspended. The continual arrival of undocumented people from the neighbouring African coasts – described by Didier Fassin and Mariella Pandolfi (2010) as a state of emergency that is shaped by discourses of humanitarianism and political interests – is handled by the Italian authorities through the control of the migrants who, as argued by Gatta (2006-2007), become bodies necessarily subjected to some sort of treatment. The constitution of the category of ‘clandestine’<sup>14</sup> is a complex process that can be described as a ‘rite of passage’ and is ultimately based on techniques concerning the handling of the body (De Genova 2004) and technologies of the self (Foucault 1965). In the Temporary Stay Centres (TSCs), immigrants become detainees, victims of stigmatization that depicts them as symbols of underdevelopment and poverty, fragile lives which are subjected to ‘fingerprinting technology, detention and forced expulsion’ (Ravenda 2012: 116). The body of the migrant becomes silent and invisible, plunged into a state of alienation that produces a separation between, on the one hand the recognized rights of the citizen who plays a specific role in society, and on the other hand the refugee as *homo sacer*, whose status of non-order delimits his or her rights (Agamben 2003). Gatta examined the administration of the migrants from their arrival on the pier and ordered them into five stages: counting, isolating, fixing, surveillance, and silencing (Gatta 2006-2007: 73-74). After the first count, which often happens when they get off the boat and onto the pier, migrants are divided into rows of five or ten and then grouped in a squatting position, a pose that allows the more efficient control and that makes it difficult for them to communicate with each other (Gatta 2006-2007: 60-64). According to Gatta (2012), these practices are liable to create spaces of clear division between migrants and authorities. They determine power hierarchies in which the state of exception - the one in which the law is suspended - seems to be immediately reversed in the standardization and rationalization of ordered mechanisms of surveillance. The rigidity that characterizes the phases of landing and transportation to the TSC produces invisible barriers between authorities and migrants, categorized into ‘illegal bodies’ subjected to power hierarchies (Gatta 2006-2007); it produces a distance, a demarcation line.

On the other hand, Marco Aime (2018) reflects upon a further aspect of migrant landing in Lampedusa: the moment of the landing, which is effectively turned into a great spectacle for its virtual audience, but nevertheless, goes well beyond such representation. The visceral experiences of the borderland are often silenced and invisible during the spectacle of the border. This suggests that both the ‘bareness’ of the migrants, and their humanness, need further exploration, attention, and

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14 See also Triandafyllidou, 2009. *Clandestino project*. European Commission. Available at: [http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media\\_147171\\_en.pdf](http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_147171_en.pdf) [Accessed on 11/02/2016]

ethnographic care. During the migrant landing in Lampedusa, Aime suggests that the ultimate condition of ‘bareness’ for the migrants who land at the Favaloro pier consists of how each person at the pier, — doctors, Police agents, volunteers, and migrants, — approaches the other. It most importantly rests on their gestures of welcoming or neglect (Hall 2014). Citing the African saying ‘A kind person is king for the foreigner’, Aime (2018: 648) reflects upon the value of a smile, or a caress, given in that specific circumstance to someone who is struggling. ‘Marta, Peola, Pilla, Costantino’, Aime writes, naming some of the volunteers and members of Mediterranean Hope who I met in my fieldwork, ‘and the others, with their smile and their welcoming words, must appear as really important to the newcomers. Their faces do not push the migrants away, but they rather say yes, you are one of us’ (Aime Ibid: Location 648). Based on similar experiences I had during migrant landings in Lampedusa, which I extend to multiple other moments of encounter on the island, I argue that migrants appeared in experience as both the bearers of inequality — stripped out of most of the most basic human rights — and the carriers of hope, endurance, and a strong sense of vitality. Reflecting on the varieties of migrant, locals, and migration workers’ experiences I wrote about, I ask if we can conceptually address the experiences of undocumented migrants by the use of Agamben’s notion of ‘bare life’, and what implications this would have.

This thesis moves across these ambiguous spaces of mutual recognition, indifference, and neglect. Ontologically and epistemologically, it follows the leads of existential anthropology by addressing the phenomenon of undocumented migration as a possibility to open up a broader reflection about human existence in borderlands (Josephides 2014). For Michael Jackson, the migrant ‘brings into sharp relief... the vexed ethical question of whether we see ourselves and others as united by our common humanity or differentiated by our social identities’ (Jackson 2013a: 8). ‘The tragedy of the migrant’, Jackson argues, lies on the assumption that ‘his humanity is wholly determined by his place in a social hierarchy’ (Ibid: 8). However, although ‘any human life is largely shaped by moral, political, social, and religious regimes, every human life unfolds in ways that only partially realize, replicate, or reinforce these regimes.’ (Ibid: 8). In sum, the notion of the ‘*homo sacer*,’ and the ‘bare life’ are useful categories to understand the political, social, religious, and economic mechanisms which shape human life in borderlands and elsewhere. However, these categories cannot fully and completely describe the lived experiences of migrants, and they further fail to address the *lifeworlds* of locals and migration workers. Rules, roles, economic conditions, legal status, social and cultural identity, tell much but not everything about the contradictory, complex, and uncertain experiences of the inhabitants of the borderland of Lampedusa. If ‘our very humanity can never be entirely determined by social orders and their moral rationales’ (Jackson 2013a: 8), an ethnography of life in borderland situations must move across the social, political, economic, religious and cultural

realms by the means of an existential approach. It must recognize that one's actions, thoughts, and existence in the world cannot be reduced to general labels. The experiences of 'bareness', must be read through the particular moments of interplay among the rescuers, the migrants, and the locals alike. Their existence lies in how they cope with usual and extraordinary circumstances. Their identity consists of the intersubjective space, where 'unpredictable situations and extant moral norms' (Ibid 2013: 8) intertwine with one another, but still converged.

Borderlands do not only provide a dramatically interesting space for critically engaging with the lived experiences of the migrants. Although scholars have studied the issue of undocumented migration in the Mediterranean, this thesis attempts to give more breadth to the understanding of migration by moving across more or less visible spaces on the island of Lampedusa. It does so through an extensive fieldwork undertaken during a period of eleven months, which allowed me to note how people act upon multiple contingencies: from the urgency of the migrant landings, to the relaxed time at the beach in summer, the joy of being alive when touching land, to the 'melancholic hope' (Mookherjee 2007; Mookherjee forthcoming) of improving one's life conditions. Borderlands are sites of transit, encounter, and clash. They are not just frontiers where undocumented migrants attempt to find a new life and border agents work to selectively let them in.

As ambiguous zones of human encounter, borderlands provide an ideal space to reflect upon moral possibilities, moral agency, and ethics (Jackson 2013a; Josephides 2014). Most anthropologists have addressed the issue of personhood following Mauss' understanding of the 'person' as being the mirror of the geographical, political, social, and cultural circumstances where one is born (Mauss 1990). Accordingly, arbitrariness, personal choice, and reason would play no role in shaping who we are. Extensive studies of borderland situations, the Nazi case being one of the most telling in modern European history, allowed academics to question some basic assumptions rooted in the anthropological approach to human experience, moral agency, and ethics. Research on individual stories of doctors who refused to use Jewish people for experiments, common people who hid children in their houses against the will of the authorities, and others who reported the presence of Jewish people to the police easing deportation procedures, led some academics to bring forward a fundamental assumption: human experience could not be reduced to moral codes equally applying to everyone in a given culture or society (Rapport 2014; Josephides 2014). Following German historian Jan Philip Reemtsma's work, anthropologist Michael Carrithers states that 'even in the darkest circumstances some morality akin to universalism can arise, but such a morality is nevertheless tied to particular places and people' (Carrithers 2005: 439). In line with Carrithers' notion of 'moral agency', which 'allows that people exercise insight (or foolishness) and good (or bad) reason', this thesis approaches the people with whom I worked in the field as both products and producers of their

lives. If on the one hand being a migrant, a local, or a migration worker, meant being necessarily subjected to particular economic, political, legal, and social conditions which inevitably constituted very distinct kinds of opportunities, people were ‘both acting and reacting’ (Carrithers 1995: 440) within a labyrinth of opportunities, situations, and possibilities. Such approach to fieldwork determined ‘a picture of society as a web of persons both acting upon each other and acted upon and therefore in a state of flux and, to a degree, uncertainty’ (Ibid 440). Thus, as Jackson (2013: 9) argues ‘we cannot preemptively declare that any human actions is in its very nature right or wrong, good or bad, true or false. Rather, its worth lies in what we achieve within the limits of what is possible.’ The uncertainty and doubtful nature of human relationships, this dynamic response to external and personal impulses, and this situational, contingent, and often contradictory essence, emerge vehemently in this thesis. However, in this work I further push Carrithers (2005) and Jackson’s (2013) arguments by arguing that within states of exception, zones of emergency, borderlands or frontiers, indifference and love, repulsion and attraction, selfishness and mutuality, are not just moments which help us determine the complex web of meanings, actions and responses among people in given circumstances. The particular qualities of people’s gestures, thoughts, words, and momentary or habitual attitudes towards each other, ultimately become the condition for implementing and reproducing the sovereign power of exclusion, or for giving life to other forms of life. The phenomenon of undocumented migration and the figure of the migrant ultimately ‘brings into sharp relief a discrepancy that is felt, to some degree, by all human beings — between their membership in a specific society and their membership in a single species’ (Jackson 2013a: 8). Empirically grounded on the everyday life of migrants, migration workers, and the locals’ in Lampedusa, this work aims to describe how such discrepancies appear and fade away, how they create a distance among people or allow for mutuality, reciprocity, and love. As I will argue in chapter 6, Love is, as opposed to indifference, the manifestation of one’s gestures of kindness, acknowledgment, and care for the well-being of someone else. It is grounded on a felt need to recognize others’ pain as internal, that is to feel responsible to some extent, and to do what is likely to reduce others’ suffering, within the possibilities of one’s personal contingencies. Love is to act upon a felt sense of shared humanness with someone else, rather than prioritizing any label, category, or reason determining a distance, fostering indifference, and allowing for violence to spread. Love is not about moral norms, universal ideas of common humanity, human rights, or utopic visions of the world. It stems from how people respond to extreme situations, to borderland situations, either by making a profit out of others’ misfortunes and suffering, or by feeling that their world is to some extent intertwined with others’ needs.

## Outline of the Thesis

In **chapter I**, I set the methodological framework of my research, proposing an existential approach to the field, and critiquing a positivist thinking as opposed to an intersubjective one (Crapanzano 1992). I reflect upon the ontological and epistemological challenges of entering a borderland space as Lampedusa, where the boundaries between insider and outsider, ethical and unethical, genuinely interested and emotionally frustrated, must be seriously thought through as intersubjective spaces of the flow of life (Rabinow 1977; Jackson 2013a). As a result, anthropological knowledge in borderland spaces is presented (even more drastically than it is the case of most anthropological knowledge) as resulting from enforced displacement, or crises that wrench individuals out of their habitual routines of thought and behaviour.

**Chapter II** explores the ways in which memorial ceremonies conducted in the name of equality, humanness, and emergency fail to answer important questions on the responsibilities for migrants' death in the Mediterranean and the survivors' requests to obtain a dignified burial. In memorial events like the one occurring on the 3<sup>rd</sup> October, the presence of the State towards locals, migrants, and direct witnesses of tragic events, alive and dead, turns into an ambiguously violent form of abandonment. It is a kind of violence that is difficult to discern because it occurs under the illusion of care. This Institutional failure in fulfilling the State promises becomes the condition of locals and migrants' existence, of their sense of "being in the world" which is often expressed as an intimate struggle for being acknowledged. In different forms, and for different reasons, the people I introduce in this chapter experienced the possibility of being left to die by the State, but their struggle, was witness of their vitality.

**Chapter III** takes the title from an ambiguous and illuminating concept, the Absurd, as it emerges empirically. Absurd as I explore it ethnographically responds to Andersson's critique of the illegal industry as a purposeless self-reproducing system, and it brings forward the sense of unsoundness, lack of harmony, and disequilibrium felt by the migrants and the migration workers as a result of coping with borderland situations in Lampedusa and on the way to Europe. The term 'absurd' defines the disequilibrium<sup>15</sup> between the roles attributed to people by the system of undocumented migration during the landing, and their lived experience in Lampedusa. Here existential anthropology provides the theoretical framework to re-read the spectacle of the border as an existential situation of being 'betwixt and between, of struggle and suffering' (Jackson 2008: 377). In this chapter I thus explore how a limit — between rescuers and rescued — is constituted and experientially transformed. I

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<sup>15</sup> 'The illegality industry is in a constant state of disequilibrium' (Andersson 2012: 280).

examine the physical, contextual, and politically constituted boundaries between a migrant and a migration worker, and their unstable, transformative, and reversible intimate and individual perceptions of the world in borderland situations. In this chapter, I show how such indeterminacy affects people's perceptions of themselves, of each other, and of their positionality: how migrants' suffering turns into hope, and migration workers' role of saviours turns into a call for help. Departing from De Genova's (2004) use of the spectacle of the border and Agamben's (2005) notion of "bare life", the ethnographic material reveals migrants and migration workers' shared sense of uncertainty and their struggle for making sense of what they are experiencing.

**Chapter IV** is born out of the need to reflect upon the ways in which locals have responded to progress and the business of undocumented migration in time. The ethnographic material, primarily based on Lampedusani's oral stories of past and present life on the island, questions the threshold between locals' indifference and responses to imagining migrants' dead bodies floating on the Mediterranean Sea, in proximity to Lampedusa's shores. Moved by the inherent contradictions between locals' fear of being 'conquered' by migrants and their growing interest in taking economic advantage out of the business of migration, I consider the extent to which endurance, hope, and mutuality, turned into indifference. In this chapter I explore the different gradients of mutuality and self-interest, giving and profit making that are played out on the island. Through an analysis of locals' *lifeworlds*, I will reflect upon the paradox of indifference; of the acknowledgment of the migrants as human beings which takes place through the imagined horror at the idea of accidentally eating their flesh via fish consumption.

**Chapter V** is about small gestures at the CPSA of Lampedusa, and it examines how the space of the camp is a space of exclusion and humanness. This chapter explores the possibilities of action and interaction at the CPSA, looking at spaces of detention from a phenomenological perspective. It shows how the realm of exclusion and separation of subjects is experienced by migration workers as an ethical space. Following the discussion of Chapter IV, the relationship between intimacy and indifference determines the ethical space, that is here explored through the everyday forms of interaction of migration workers with migrants. Migration workers' proximity with migrants can allow for encountering others' *lifeworlds*. The intersubjective process of mutual give and take, which I refer to as "presence", can cause an intimate emotional struggle (Levinas 1979). It can lead towards a deep sense of satisfaction. Thus, in this chapter I will not refer to isolated ethical acts, but rather as ethics envisaged as an ongoing reciprocal practice of give and take (Jackson 2012).

**Chapter VI** further addresses the notions of indifference and Love as intrinsic manifestation of the discrepancies between the empirical emergence and mainstream media representation of life in borderlands. It departs from an ethnographic moment which is representative of how ethics is not

about adhering to a religious creed, moral norms, or values about our common humanity. Rather it is about the attitudes, smiles, and intimate expression of care for others. Instead of being constructed upon social, political, religious, or cultural precepts, Love, as well as indifference, emerge as human qualities, in this sense, as cosmopolitan aspects of our humanity. Influenced by contingencies, individual interests, profit, fear, and a sense of non-belonging to others, both indifference and Love are ultimately possible in the most favourable and the darkest times. They depend on how people deal with borderland situations, either by attempting to let others in, or by rejecting what appears as problematic, dangerous, or unworthy of one's time and energy. Love, as I argue, is not ultimate or definitive resolutions to the condition of abandonment, absurdity, and indifference discussed in the previous chapters. It is instead the result of humanness, here understood as "*humanitas*" or "*philantropia*" (Levinas 1979); the capability of turning negativity into positivity, of recognizing one's weaknesses and of being attentive to others' needs. These moments emerged ethnographically as "acts of love", in other words, as sparks of light within an uncertain, doubtful, and ambiguous life situation: life at the borderland.

There is a further consideration to be made. When Agamben (2016) writes of the *homo sacer*, he does not only refer to its 'bareness', as many have pointed out, but he also addresses the fundamental issue of what kind of life do we live, and what place does arbitrariness have in how a form of life comes to existence, and lives. If we take Agamben's notion of the *homo sacer* from an existential perspective, that is if we look at how people, and not just migrants, live their lives in borderland situations, we may come to the conclusion that once again, the central dilemma of handling the theme of undocumented migration lies precisely in our attempt to use labels which tend to categorize people and give a precise form to their existence. Human existence is however resistant to classification. It may show, in a specific moment, and under a certain circumstance, that the *homo sacer* is a mutable condition, a life situation, a state of being, which is transient, conditional, and transformative. It is transient because it can address the migrant, the local, and the migration worker, albeit from very different perspectives, and in very different forms. It is conditional, because it emerges under specific conditions which shall not be considered as static, immutable, and everlasting. It is transformative because although the migrant's state of being may be compared with that of the '*homo sacer*', his or her existence takes multiple and uncountable other forms.

That is to say: bareness is a condition of human existence. It may result from a space that we call the camp, a suspension of the law, an erasure of human rights. However, there are two fundamental points to reflect on. First, 'bareness' does not exclude vitality (Hall 2014). The borderland of Lampedusa may otherwise suggest that there is at times an inverted relation between the condition in which migrants live, and their strong sense of being in the world, of establishing

relationships with others, of enduring in life. On the other hand, a 'legal' life, may experience other forms of pain, suffering, and ethical dilemmas, at times lived as unreachable or unsound life situations which seem to have no resolution. Struggling for a way out of the chaos generated by the absurd workings of the illegal industry is a common trait of all inhabitants of Lampedusa. The ways they manage, fail, or attempt to achieve so, step by step, and time to time, is relative to each particular situation, life experiences, personal attitudes, economic, legal, and political contingencies. Theirs stories, thoughts, and gestures, all speak of existence at the borderland of Lampedusa. They inform us on what impact the industry of migration has on the people who live within it, and they tell us something fundamental about the notion of existential situation, that is how people live their lives when faced with particularly challenging choices, threats, fears, uncertainties, hopes, desires, and needs.



# Chapter I Rethinking the anthropologist Hermes in borderland spaces.

Methodology is the means for understanding anthropological work (Brewer, 2000), and the methodological approach defines the method of data collection, but is fundamentally determined by the experience of fieldwork (Crapanzano 1992). Anthropologists collect and produce 'data', and are called on to represent 'facts', - not to philosophize, but to follow a method - a pattern of understanding which is based on evidence. Facts, however, 'cannot be collected as if they were rocks, picked up and put in the laboratory' (Rabinow 1977:150). As a hybrid discipline within the realm of social sciences, anthropology had to justify its form and substance to the positivist sciences, borrowing terms from biology, economics, and linguistics, in order to remark its status (Foucault 1972). As a result, this paranoia of self-celebration has led to a process of self-destruction (Crapanzano 1992). The major strength of ethnography was repeatedly neglected by a positivistic view of science, which many have considered extremely inappropriate for some fields of the humanities (Rabinow 1977; Jackson 2013b).

Starting from positivistic and reductionist views, and critically engaging with notions of doubt and uncertainty,<sup>16</sup> the following chapter discusses methodology as the outcome of my positionality, responsibility and ethical dilemmas in borderland situations. Ontology and epistemology are therefore introduced as intersubjective and transformative processes that come to life through fieldwork. As primary constituents of life in borderland situations, contradiction and doubt are taken as paradigms of knowledge production, central notions for an aware reading of methods and ethics in the ethnography of Lampedusa. In this chapter, I argue for an introspective elaboration of the notion of anthropological knowledge, based on Jackson's reference to ethnographic 'understanding' as 'a result of enforced displacement, of crises that wrench a person out of his or her habitual routines of thought and behaviour, rather than a product of philosophical choice or idle curiosity' (Jackson 2013b: 11). Starting with a postmodernist critique of ethnographic facts, and questioning their assumed objectivity as envisaged by positivist thinking, I propose a phenomenological approach that is primarily founded on the understanding of ethnographic experience as uncertain and intersubjectively constituted (Jackson 2013b).

Based on a phenomenological understanding of methodology that draws directly on the many experiences of living life in the field, in the first section I question reductionist and categorizing approaches to methods in ethnography, building my argument on the intersubjective forms of

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<sup>16</sup> upon which existential anthropology rests

uncertainty and contradiction that I experienced in Lampedusa. Giving an account of my initial arrival on the island, I introduce ethnographic work as a form of living life, and I take methods as flows or processes of unpredictability. I describe how I came to know some of my main research participants in the field, and base my methods upon what will be defined as the spontaneity of becoming. I define the method that leads to a broad ethnographic knowledge as '*panta rei*.'<sup>17</sup> As I will state, in what Jaspers calls *Grenzsituationem* (border/limit situations), being a Sicilian assumes diverse meanings, a friend to some, but a betrayer to many others. Similarly, being a researcher can be seen as an opportunity to help or as damaging to the island's image. In the specific contexts I will present, pre-given methods lose their purpose.

With this in mind, in the last section I discuss ethics as a process of introspection, a self-critical analysis, of reflecting oneself into the field, which reshapes the anthropologist's sense of responsibility. Responsibility determines the position of the researcher within the field, and is determined by the practicalities of ethics in ordinary states of extraordinariness. As a consequence, ethics will be discussed through a self-critical reflection on the role of the anthropologist. In his essay on how to conduct fieldwork, Crapanzano (1992) depicts the anthropologist as a godly figure, and calls her/him Hermes, the Greek God known as the messenger of Zeus. Delivering a message, collected from some mysterious or little-known area of the world, and bringing it to the largest number of people, is, for Crapanzano, the role that many anthropologists seem to assume in the history of the discipline. However, anthropologists are not Gods, and like the people they work with, they are subjected to ethical dilemmas, misunderstandings, and the inability to find the right words to communicate what they have experienced to others. This chapter addresses some of these issues, by introducing the various social groups and intertwined realities co-living on the island of Lampedusa, and the difficulties, and potential issues of doing research in borderlands like Lampedusa.

## On Methods

Methods are sets of procedural rules that provide a certain reliability to knowledge (Brewer 2000), according to an objective, scientific or commonly acceptable authoritative understanding (Foucault 1972). The question of reliability has haunted anthropology since its inception. Geertz (1973) introduced the notion of 'partiality' in relation to 'objective or definite truth', and used the term partial truths to define the form of knowledge represented by an ethnographic account. In fact, representation was a debated issue over which the authority of anthropological knowledge was believed by many to be at risk, rather than being given its own legitimacy. In the Introduction of 'Writing Culture', Clifford

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<sup>17</sup> *Panta rei* can be literally translated as 'everything flows'. The term is originally Heraclitus's conception of the world as a constant flow of being.

presents the book as an opening ‘onto the wider practice of writing about, against, and among cultures’ (Clifford 1986:3). Accordingly, I write about, against, and among an objective or otherwise positivistic understanding of methods. I take postmodern views as an opportunity to engage critically with extraordinarily normalized situations in Lampedusa, and existential anthropology as the conceptual tool through which ethnographic work can be made intelligible. Knowing is an intersubjective matter, and it only exists in-relation, as a varying combination of arbitrary decisions and unpredictable situations. ‘Fatalistic submission, the influence or advice of others, and careful calculation all enter, to some degree and in constantly varying ways, into our responses to critical situations’ (Jackson 2013b: 19-20). In the following section, I draw upon Jackson’s reflection, and introduce ethnography in Lampedusa as a particularly informative method through which the dilemma of uncertainty can become a paradigm of knowledge. I further demonstrate how the experience of uncertain and contradictory life worlds, in an exceptionally ordinary state of normalized emergency, such as Lampedusa, requires a phenomenological method. This (method), I will argue, goes beyond positivism, imbuing reductionism with life, and redrawing the borders of simplistic categorization, thus enabling us to grasp the complexities of lived experiences in borderland situations.

### A field of uncertainty: the spontaneity of becoming

This thesis deals with issues of morality and ethics, indifference and suffering in borderland situations. It explores such notions through an in-depth research of memory and the history of the island of Lampedusa; the stories of indifference and solidarity I experienced and heard from the migrants, locals, and migration workers. The research was first developed during my MRes in St. Andrews, when I read about surveillance and control systems in *states of exception*, and the constitution of the *homo sacer* (Agamben 1998, 2005, 2014). I tried to work out what ethics and morality might mean in practice, and above all to find out how an ideal or plausible 'methodological' approach to fieldwork could take place (Nussbaum 2001). On the methodology and method, I wrote a research proposal in which I reflected carefully on how to collect ethnographic material and approach locals, migrants, and doctors. Fieldwork, I wrote, is imagined and actualized as a dialogical and interactive process of knowledge production, limited by the emblematically rigid system of power control, surveillance, categorization and stigmatization which characterizes the ‘camp’, but is nonetheless limitless in its unpredictable and transformative essence (Ravenda 2012; Wardle 2013). I did not know that what I referred to as the unpredictable and transformative essence of the *camp*, would have taken totally unexpected forms that would surprisingly reveal the contingencies upon

which the tendency to categorize reality rests. Let me expand on this by introducing my experience of fieldwork in Lampedusa from the day of my arrival to the island.

I landed in Lampedusa on 29<sup>th</sup> March 2016, and soon learnt that ‘contradiction’ was one of the explicit realities I would have encountered within my fieldwork. I left the field site for short breaks home in April, June, and August 2016, and in February 2017. Doctors and mediators soon told me ‘You cannot stay here for more than a month. You’ll go crazy. Look at us. You lose your mind when you stay in this place for too long.’ Doctors at the CPSA worked for the migrants; to secure their physical and mental health. Yet, they themselves felt disconnected from the world, prisoners of a condensed reality which one could not deal with for too long, apparently. I followed their advice; I left for England in October 2016, and I returned in January 2017, concluding my fieldwork in April 2017, two months earlier than the expected time. The experience of other life worlds is a possibility for comprehending other persons’ ways of life, and a chance of exploring oneself. Thick (self) description is at times morally and ethically destabilizing, and in order to maintain an acceptable psychophysical balance, time away from the island is needed. As much as I would have loved to experience mind loss, having in mind Malinowski’s terrible diary accounts of his time among the Trobrianders, taking some distance really helped reflecting on the realities of suffering and indifference, heroism and egoism, resilience and abandonment one can face in Lampedusa.

With the help of my mother’s contact, a man from my home town, whose cousin lived in Lampedusa, I received the telephone number of Floriana, a young local woman. She was married with Franco, and they had four children. Floriana and Franco rented a summerhouse for the whole year, and they offered me to take it. A few weeks later, I was living there. Within a couple of days from my arrival, I realized that the brother of Floriana, Saverio, worked for the Misericordie Lampedusa<sup>18</sup> at the CPSA. First conversations gave me the impression of a person who is passionate about his work. In the following months, I would realize that following a brawl taking place inside the CPSA among a group Sub-Saharan African migrant, and a group of Tunisians, Saverio pushed some migrants, and he would have slapped them, if necessary. He told me that they were underage, but bigger than he was, and that he had to intervene, because otherwise, they would have hurt him. There was a thin layer between using one’s power, or abusing it, in contexts like the one of the CPSA in Lampedusa, and often, the people who had such power, did not acknowledge it. As an anthropologist, I had to be cautious about how to handle each particular situation of injustice, violence, and suspension of people’s rights. On the one hand, I could not become a silent accomplice of migration workers’ verbal or physical violence towards some of the migrants. On the other hand,

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<sup>18</sup> Misericordie Lampedusa is an NGO held by locals who volunteer to provide sanitary assistance to elders and people in need among the population of the island, also participating to migrant landings.

I needed to remember that mine was a position of privilege. I never had to live on the island, suffer political manoeuvres and government choices which caused tragic accidents at sea (See Chapter II), overpopulation of the island (See Chapter II and VI), lack of jobs, dysfunctional water supply, and inefficient management of the CPSA. I had to listen and try to understand what moved some to show anger and frustration, others to express disbelief towards the migrants, the journalists, or the politicians, and some others to act for a radical change in Lampedusa.

Franco's brother was the warehouseman in the CPSA, and he had worked there for more than ten years. Even Franco, I then learned, had worked for the CPSA as a water supplier some years before. He felt that his experience at the CPSA entitled him to know about undocumented migrants. 'I know them' [the migrants], Franco said. 'I know them very well'. Gatta's work on Lampedusa already in 2006 problematizes the notion of 'we already know them', explaining how police agents in particular referred to new coming migrants as a generalized 'they', as if those who came for the first time in their lives were the same of the other thousands of people who had been coming in the previous years. Such an attitude, I came to realize, was common to a good number of locals, migration workers, and police agents alike. Retrospectively, I felt a similar feeling of 'already knowing' what happened on the island; how migrant landings took place, how the CPSA worked, what locals really needed, and what migrants wished for, as if they were all the same, and as if I could really know so well, and so much, just because I had experienced some of it. Getting to know them from a close distance, was a fundamental alternative path.

Franco's house seemed to be fairly isolated. The road which brought downtown, I soon discovered, was the 'migrants' road', where mostly young Sub-Saharan Africans used to walk to go to town and to go back to the 'camp'. That road, going downtown and coming back home, would have become one of my most privileged points of observation, where at different times of the year, and for reasons I will describe in the following chapters, migrants' presence was strangely consistent, as opposite to their invisibility in areas like the 'Rabbit island', Cala Pulcino, the lighthouse, or the door of Europe (Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Touristic map of Lampedusa.**

[http://www.imperatoreblog.it/wp-content/uploads/Lampedusa\\_cartina.jpg](http://www.imperatoreblog.it/wp-content/uploads/Lampedusa_cartina.jpg)

In my research proposal I wrote that I would have been to the Church every morning, to meet locals, and get to know them well. Books and articles presented Lampedusa as a Christian community. I knew nothing of Lampedusa's non-believers. Of the island of rebels, artists and fishermen who were suspicious about foreigners. At that time, I still did not know; I did not know that in many of the planned early visits to Church, I would not be able to wake up, because I had stayed up all night. To reveal, in Lampedusa? The answer is yes.

I did not know that many of my evenings would have been spent in the company of CPSA's operators, cultural mediators, paediatricians, gynaecologists, infectious disease specialists, members of Frontex, European Asylum Support Office (EASO), Save the Children, National Institute for Health, Migration and Poverty (INMP). According to the method, I should have approached these with a precise order: semi-structured interviews and dialogues, possibly based on preselected key issues such as 'emergency,' 'suffering,' 'moral-ethical sense.' Triangulation, I wrote, would constitute an ideal method of collecting knowledge from a wider spectrum of perspectives. I did not know about the downfall I would have experienced, not just from a purely working perspective, but more generally as a researcher, a Sicilian, and most simply as a person. Mistrust, incomprehension, avowed judgments, gossip taking the form of titanic misinterpretations, and attempts to create a dialogue with those whom, as I avoided to label in groups, had already categorized me as 'the journalist', and 'the opportunist', were all intrinsic aspects of conducting fieldwork in Lampedusa. Categorizing, in Lampedusa, is an inevitable form that determines a reversed vision of the world; to use Debord's (1995) words, 'an upside down of reality.' My aim was however to carry on working, understanding that I could not earn people's trust that easily.

I tried to write key points according to which I could collect information in the daily conversations with old locals, mediators and doctors, and young migrants, many of whom are now friends. I took notes after dinner. Reflections and conversations with my respondents were stored on my laptop: weekly material reviews, new ideas and desperate attempts to deepen the issues that seemed to be apparently interesting with mediators, migrants and locals. The content of each conversation I had, with migrants, migration workers, and locals, was regularly questioned, or at least complicated, by what I would come to know afterwards. My daily work in Lampedusa was planned in this order: in the morning I had breakfast at the Royal Bar, sitting at the tables in via Roma, and interacting with some old men, at the very beginning of the fieldwork with Alfio from Mediterranean Hope, Monica and Giusy, but more often with the EASO team. In the afternoon, I had a coffee at the Paradise, or just standing by one of the benches in via Roma, chatting with some of the locals that were dearest to me. With many of them, I used to listen to never-ending debates on politics they seem not to fully comprehend, the invasion of the Turks,<sup>19</sup> and the beautiful ‘old times’ on the island. Of course, things hardly went according to my plans. In Lampedusa, and by broader extent during fieldwork, the encounter is hardly matching pre-given plans (Simpson 2012). On the electric scooter, as I left home, I already was on the *migrants’ road*, the one that all (migrants) walk to and from the town centre and back to the CPSA. Someone smiled and waved with the hand. I stopped to have a conversation, and some hours later, all daily plans have changed.

I met Rob thanks to Sidi, an African waiter. With him, I had long conversations in the afternoons of April and May, getting to know his story as the son of a Senegalese migrant, and his good and tough times in Lampedusa. He introduced me to Vincent and Manuel, two mediators of EASO and Frontex respectively. With Vincent, I soon established a very good relationship. He was interested in my project from the beginning, and through him, I met Yonas, another cultural mediator from EASO. What methods did I use? Snowball sampling, person-centered interviews, grand-tour and mini-tour questions. Retrospectively, the term that most truthfully speaks back to my methods is ‘uncertainty’. There is no exact where, how, when, what or why. In a place of passage, a space at the limit between certain and uncertain, where some day one plays football with dozens of young Gambians, and the next one realizes that they have all been transferred to Sicily, methods must stem from the anthropologist’s attempt to grasp what lies within the life worlds of those living on the island (Malkki and Cerwonka 2007). The ethnographic method is *per se* a constant experimentation – an attempt to adopt pre-considered techniques according to our knowledge of the field and a hypothesis that could

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<sup>19</sup> Locals tend to refer to African migrants as ‘Turks.’ The term has generally negative connotations and can be historically linked to the Sicilian scream to the invasion of the Turks in Palermo (1799).

be empirically confirmed or potentially reformulated (Dewey 1958). However, as Jackson (2013: 19) nicely puts it,

‘There are times when one may reasonably aspire to be an active subject – exercising will in relation to the world. But there are also times when one must endure the actions of others, bend their will, meet their demands, suffer in silence, and exercise patience... subjection must be placed on a par with agency as a human coping strategy.’

In the following sections I will offer various ethnographic instances where Jackson’s fine remark becomes particularly relevant to the experience of a researcher in borderland spaces. Drawing from the contexts of uncertainty I have sketched above, what must be highlighted is that the most telling events, facts, or episodes which I experienced during my fieldwork and will become the *corpus* of the ethnography, stem from their *spontaneity of becoming*. Accordingly, if we are to determine a methodical discourse, I wish to suggest that the ethnography I hereby present, should not be read without first recognizing the fundamental role of *life-force* — contradictory, uncertain, and spontaneous — upon which its main theoretical and methodological features were determined.<sup>20</sup> The positivists and rationalists — those who see the error and the superfluous in words, and in the adjectives perceive the excess and struggle to deepen into the content — might ask: how to express this in practice? To them, I respond in the following paragraphs by means of ethnographic reflection, highlighting the life-process of uncertainty and doubt (methods) upon which anthropological knowledge is intersubjectively constituted.

### *Panta rei as ethnographic method*

I already knew that in the particular context of normalized emergency I was going to enter, open interviews and dialogues would allow me to be less intrusive towards the wide range of ‘vulnerable’ I were to encounter. I knew but did not really know that on *the rock*<sup>21</sup>, any interaction, exchange of ideas, moment of complicity, cheerfulness, frustration, or intolerance would have intrinsically been embedded into the process of anthropological knowledge production. Rabinow (1977) begins his ethnographic account on his experience in Morocco by describing his unclear feelings towards fieldwork. ‘After all,’ he writes, ‘now that I was in the field, everything was fieldwork’ (Ibid: 11). I now read Rabinow’s reflections with a different understanding than before conducting fieldwork,

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20 ‘In the correspondence illustrates how ethnography is not “a methodology” at all in the traditional understanding of the term. It cannot be reduced to a set of standardized techniques that any practitioner can implement...ethnography relies on improvisation’ (Malkki and Cerwonka 2007:20).

21 Locals define Lampedusa as ‘the rock’. A tiny space of emerged land right in the middle of nowhere, forgotten by many, and exploited by many others.



simply because, before my ‘initiation to the clan of ethnographers’ as he describes the rite of passage to anthropology, I did not really know; did not know that chatting at an aperitif, laughing and shrinking, would eventually allow me to become an integral part of the EASO and the INMP team. That the hours sitting on a bench with the elderly people of the island, would turn into lived experiences of isolation, knowledge of Lampedusa's memories, sense of abandonment by the State, betrayal by the manipulators of Information, and frustration towards migrants who happen to be victims of both wealthy and less wealthy inhabitants of the globalized world. I did not know that going for a swim at sea would allow me to meet Izack, Ismael, and Mohammed,<sup>22</sup> nor did I know that coming back from a night out at the Fourth island,<sup>23</sup> I would have heard about Z. — the woman who offered to sit on deck and got burnt out of the mix of sea water and petrol in order to protect a young pregnant girl she had met on boat. Life, I came to realize, would become master of my work. Lying on the rocks of Mare Morto's cave (See Figure 1), writing down my notes, I would have been reminded of the unpredictability of the sea, and upon it, determined my method. Lampedusa is the land of the uncertain — from landings at night waiting for departure for young migrants, and the smiles of the most unfairly weak, to the tears of the least obviously fragile people. The anthropological experiment, writes Crapanzano (1992), is based upon doubt and the responsibility which inescapably haunts the researcher's writing. I did not know how I would have responded to such an experiment; the attempt to live life in borderland situations, and the consequent responsibility stemming from it. Nor did I know how a *modus operandi* would be found: the method, remedy or solution to a dilemma that while being ontological and epistemological, was inextricably connected to my personal (moral, conceptual and ethical) position (Battaglia 1999; Simpson 2011).

I was a young and fairly sociable researcher; a Sicilian who could speak English, Italian, and most importantly in Lampedusa, I could speak the Sicilian dialect. As cultural activities are subjected to variations that together constitute a unit, language is polymorphous and yet creates bridges. By means of speaking dialect, I could be able to get closer to some of the elderly locals in Lampedusa. Language allowed me to turn a simple word into the narration of a story. Dialect, in its etymological heterogeneity, became a reason of reflection, play or derision, according to the ways in which terms were used ‘here’ in the island, and ‘there’, on *terraferma*<sup>24</sup> (Sicily). My knowledge of terms most commonly used in Sicilian fishing communities in several occasions softened the defensive walls erected by most Lampedusani. As a Sicilian, I was trusted to have the capability to really comprehend them, to understand what living on ‘the rock’ actually meant — the real problems of the island (lack

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22 These are fictional names of Sub-Saharan African migrants whom I have met during fieldwork. They will be introduced through the following chapters.

23 It is the name of a restaurant and night club in Lampedusa

24 Mainland: generally, it is perceived as not-sea. Dry land. Locals use the term ‘*terraferma*’ to refer to Sicily, an island (the largest region in Italy) that people who live on the rock perceive as if it was mainland.

of a hospital, economic and cultural insecurity, dependency on emergency helicopters challenged by the winds, and daily ships that can be stopped by the bad weather for days or even weeks). Some may depict it as anthropology at home; and in some respects, one has the impression to analyse very familiar phenomena, places which do not seem strange, similar behavioural traits, and common problems.

I was considered a fellow Sicilian by the elderly of Lampedusa, and a person who showed interest and was able to listen by many of the young migrants I had the privilege to meet. For some of them, my position of researcher represented their potential *modus existendi*. Existence, in this sense, meant the opportunity to be recognized for who *they were*, rather than represented for who they were *expected to be*. As a result, many of the young migrants I met showed great interest in my questions, and excitement toward the work that could come out of it. With many of them, in particular Gambians and Ghanaians, I discussed my project and my aspirations, engaging into a dialogue as I perhaps had never been able to do before. I spent several months studying Arabic in Durham (UK) before fieldwork started, but I soon realized that the majority of the migrants I met spoke a good English or French. In the specific case, method would translate into the means by which migrants were approached, in the logic upon which questions were formulated, in the purpose of conversations, and their instrumentalization, aimed at achieving anthropological knowledge. During my fieldwork, method consisted of sitting on the rocks, while watching the sea with a group of young Gambians. It unfolded into playing on the beach, dancing in the evening, and especially being able to let the encounter take the lead. Method was about learning how to dialogue doubtfully, to be surprised by the apparently banal, to know persons, rather than migrants, and to exchange ideas, rather than taking up a specific role.

I conducted more than fifty unstructured interviews only with English speaking undocumented migrants, mostly coming from The Gambia. A dozen semi-structured interviews with migration workers, ranging from doctors to cultural mediators and Coast Guard agents. Several dozens were the semi structured interviews with local elders. However, my methodology would make very little sense if I were to define it by numbers and specific models of data collection approaches. I met many migrants, approximately one hundred. I saw eight hundred of them, only in one long night during a migrant landing in August 2016. That particular landing was an exception within the exception, as in Lampedusa landings usually consist of two to three hundred people, transferred to land to be escorted to the CPSA by bus. During summer time, migrant landings happen once or twice per week on average, but they can also take place repeatedly within a few days. During the colder months, depending on the conditions of the sea, landings are less frequent on average — up to a couple of times per month in the period of November and December 2016. I saw thousands of persons at the

landings, mostly young men approximately between sixteen and twenty-five years old<sup>25</sup>, coming mostly from Sub-Saharan Africa. Several groups of Eritreans, Somali, for a brief period some Syrians and Bangladeshi, and occasionally, in small numbers, Tunisians. On the way I approached many of these young persons, mainly from English-speaking Gambia, Ghana and Nigeria, I very soon realized that I could not do anthropology according to predetermined models, were they semi-structured interviews or open-ended probes.

Given the sensitivity of the stories of violence, torture, and death which more or less directly involved migrants' emotional worlds and personal lives, I was worried and thoroughly thought about issues of authorship and representation. As Mookherjee (2015: 19) argues, anthropologists must learn negotiating 'the complex terrain of power dynamics with informants', and I so realized that each time I encountered a migrant, ours was a new and to some extent unpredictable encounter, which ultimately depended on the nature of our relationship, and the trust we were willing to reciprocally share. I thought that many migrants could be reluctant to speak, or that they could fall in despair, were I to ask the wrong questions. Most of the migrants, however, approached me as a young man who showed interest in them. Considering the overall reluctance of locals and tourists in engaging with the migrants who exited the CPSA, they were generally glad to spend time with me.

Ultimately, I realized that while meeting an undocumented migrant in Lampedusa is an easy task, getting to know the person upon which that category has been constructed, requires a different level of understanding and interaction. What matters is not the question in itself, how one puts it, or the way in which this leads to certain conclusions. Instead, one needs to understand that the persons we tend to name as migrants, as well as the ones we refer to with other labels and predetermined orders of truth, are carriers of invaluable bags of experiences, to which all we can do is listening carefully. The winning method, I realized, was to let life flow. I met and established good relationships with dozens of migrants, but I would never really know if I could see them again the following day. We may plan to meet, but they the following day they would have already left the island, without being able to inform me, because did not have a phone, or if they did, they did not have credit. Sometimes we would be able to keep in touch. Other times, I would have lost their contacts and never found out what happened to them. *Panta rei* stood as a new paradigm of ethnographic knowledge. In the 'isola di passaggio,'<sup>26</sup> where all flaws — wind, water, persons, and birds — *panta rei* became the methodology upon which the ethnographic method rested.

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25 Approximate age is given as the result of UNICEF tables of landings in Lampedusa.

26 Island of passage, as many Lampedusani referred to Lampedusa in our conversations.

## Roles and positionalities: an intersubjective critique

‘In anthropological discourse, it would appear that the “subject-position” has acquired the paradoxical status and stability of a “root metaphor” of contingency discourses. But are subject-positions written as they are lived, and are subjects as attached to them?’ (Battaglia 1999: 120).

I was seen as a Sicilian by some, as a person by others, an alien, a traitor, an impostor, by many more. Since my arrival, I noticed that the ‘reality’ of Lampedusa could not be grasped according to predetermined methods. The very fact of being a researcher within a community that for too long had been object of media representation, mostly meant to be perceived as a ‘shark,’ a researcher who was paid by the corrupted and hypocritical EU (whose Wars are legitimized by the mask of Humanitarianism), or more simply to be considered as ‘another one,’ naïve and ignorant of everyone’s experiences, perhaps capable of producing a superficial account of what had already been said. Being a researcher in Lampedusa means to have a role, to be judged, questioned, often disbelieved, and to receive more or less direct criticism about one’s personal intentions and truthfulness.

What some in anthropology have called ‘sense of not imposing upon on the other’, or ‘being subjected to the field’, is personally destabilizing, irritating, and often hard to accept. I was labelled as a ‘spy for the police,’ a ‘friend of the cops,’ a ‘pretending idiot,’ and many other plausible appellations, attempts for interpretation, which were not the outcome of the researcher’s observation, while of the researcher made an object of investigation. From my fieldnotes:

When I go to Porto M, while Dario is being interviewed by a journalist, I sense a strange atmosphere. Anxiety, negativity and rejection are my first feelings. When Dario ends the interview, I wink to him, and he, looking back at me, asks: ‘How is police? Are they all right?’

I feel attacked, I do not react, and I stay still, mumbling something as ‘Well, I don’t know’.

What did he mean, exactly? His behaviour leads me to close up. I feel wrong, in the wrong place, with the wrong people. I feel judged, categorized, criticized, misinterpreted. I feel unjustly pointed at and put into a box. ‘I am not against anyone, neither against any of you’ I would like to say. I try to deepen my understanding of some problematic situations in Lampedusa, but I am not on anyone’s side. I must avoid taking a position. It is about the quality of the work I’ll have to write, isn’t it? (Fieldnotes 03/06/16).

For Battaglia (1999), ethnocentrism and the inscribed fixed domains of knowledge ascribed to it, can be avoided ‘by eliciting counter claims’. The reworking of the script, that Butler defines as ‘agency’, is multiple and intersubjective, open and dialogic (Battaglia 1999; Marcus 1988). These are

conceptually sounded notions. Nonetheless, in experience they give rise to that sense of discomfort and omen of misunderstanding which Jackson (2013:10) nicely puts in these words: ‘ethnography throws one into a world where one cannot be entirely oneself, where one is estranged from the ways of acting and thinking that sustain one’s accustomed sense of identity.’

When I first met Giacomo, and other members of Askavusa,<sup>27</sup> I suddenly felt obliged to behave in a way which felt uncomfortable to me at that time. Their provocative tones were an expression of power; their power to scrutinize me, to ask irritating questions, to treat me like one of many, to trust me, or to simply show attitudes of subtle closure. Theirs was to some extent a statement of their identity: they were, as their motto says, people ‘without fear’, and their mission was to promote awareness in the island by critically addressing two major issues: militarization, and the business behind the industry of undocumented migration. Although I had their same concerns, their judgmental glance, and my insecurity as a researcher at that time, caused a parting from their environment. With time, however, Giacomo and other members of Askavusa showed a more appreciating attitude towards my presence on the island. Aware of the complexities of the power dynamics on the island, I retrospectively realise that often silence can do much more than words. Time helped me to gain more confidence about the topics I was addressing, to learn about the deep sense of abandonment and profound disappointment of the locals towards the Institutions, the State, Europe, and even towards each other. On the other hand, time also helped Giacomo and other members of Askavusa to gain an idea of who I was, to learn about my work, and my interests.

I have known, dialogued, and become friend with undocumented migrants, locals, doctors, cultural mediators, Frontex and Coast Guard agents. Such multi-sited aspect of the ethnography, where ‘multiple actors from weak, ambiguous, and strong positions of power all manage ethnographic engagement’, is essential to a self-critical reflection on ethics in borderland situations (Mookherjee 2015: 18). I had to be myself, but each time, and for each person, I also had to be aware of both my potential intrusiveness, and their unpredictable choices, to speak or be silent, to open up or hold a barrier against me, to be genuine, or to try to make ‘use’ of my work. I first had to treat them as persons, rather than subjects or informants, to then learn that as I could plan to ask a question, or be interested in several aspects of their lives, they could easily do the same with me.

Decisive were the relationships built with doctors and cultural mediators working in the CPSA. I established the closest relationships with three cultural mediators from Eritrea, and one from Lampedusa. I also became very close with four doctors in particular, three Italians, and one coming from South America. Crucial to the collection of the ethnographic material were the many hours spent

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<sup>27</sup> Askavusa is a group of activists present on the island who work for workers and migrants’ rights, by fighting the militarization of the island and questioning stereotyped narratives. In Sicilian dialect, it means “barefoot,” and it was chosen as a reminder of Lampedusani’s past life.

with them, drinking coffee at a table in via Roma. Doing so meant to expose myself to further judgment, critiques, and potential misunderstandings on who I was, whose side I was working for, and what I really wanted from the inhabitants of Lampedusa. The island is small, and very little escapes rumours and chatting. Being seen with migration workers, drinking with them, or spending time with them, was to some extent a declaration of war to associations like Askavusa, or Mediterranean Hope (MH), whose position was clearly pro-migrants, and against authorities and migration workers. One of the first instances in which I met Askavusa's members, I was mistaken for someone collaborating with the Police, and kept at a distance. Likewise, the more than thirty landings I attended, verbally authorized by the Coast Guard Commander, were further proofs of my 'collaboration' with the Italian authorities. I had requested a permit to assist the landings, but for many activists and people who were actively in the battle for the migrants' rights, it was enough to see me as an outsider, or a potential enemy. Someone from MH during a landing told me that an anthropologist 'must take a position'. Was I not to take it, as it happened to be in my experience, a position will be eventually attributed to me.

After attending my first landing as a member of the Misericordie Lampedusa — a Lampedusa-based NGO also operating at molo Favaloro to carry the most urgent cases to the *Poliambulatorio* (Health Clinic) — I attended a second migrants' arrival as a volunteer for Mediterranean Hope. With MH I helped distributing snacks and warm drinks to women, men and children, welcoming them to the pier according to the practice Monica so well embodied, with an astonishing strength to respond to pain with joy, saying with a great smile 'Welcome, welcome to Lampedusa.' In Lampedusa, being welcomed can take multiple forms. For those who come to Lampedusa from a different route, welcomes are available under strict circumstances. After several months of fieldwork, I realized that from Mediterranean Hope's perspective, being seen with several organizations during the landing was not really plausible, as in the end, a role had to be taken. Not much was left of the highly respectable theoretical debates on the impartiality of the anthropologist, and of a participant observation that does not contaminate the field. I had imagined being a transforming agent, capable of being disconnected from any internal politics, observant but not directly involved in ideological diatribes and identity battles that took place in the previous years. Did I not face what lies at the crux of Sartre's argument: that 'we are, as it were, both creatures and creators of our circumstances?' (Jackson 2013b:19). As a *super partes* actor, I thought, I could have had access to a wider understanding of the ways in which practitioners, doctors, mediators, police and NGOs like MH operated and positioned themselves during the landing. Fieldwork demands choices. I then decided to attend the landings as an autonomous researcher, authorized but disconnected from any organization, so as to avoid any kind of ethical judgment. My strategy worked only to some extent.

The members of MH took distance from me. During landings, they would politely wave, exchange a few words, and leave. They would stop letting me know about the meetings they regularly had with the priest and other activists on the island, and they stopped exchanging information with me, or taking interest in my results.

On the other hand, thanks to a set of personal relations built while having a cocktail or bathing at sea, I began to spend most of my time at the harbour with EASO mediators. As we spent time together, I began to seriously doubt about the existence of a morality that was directly linked to experiencing others' suffering. Many migration workers thought, spoke, and acted as if they did not care about the migrants as I thought they should have. Through the moments I shared with them — our conversations, and mutual exchange of stories — I began experiencing a personal 'ethical' reaction to the migratory system and what it concerns.

## Ethical Process

Ethics is often envisaged as an abstract form of the tendency to act in accordance to the good. It is conceptualized as a paradigm of the good; the example upon which a common 'do well' or 'think well' is established; the practice of acting according to conscience, reason, morality, and a contextual good, which Ancient Greek philosophy attempted to abstract as an 'absolute' (Aristotle). However, a variety of approaches have shaped up as part of the 'ethical turn' of recent years. For example, Laidlaw refers to ethics as being about 'human freedom' whereas morality is mostly about constraint (Laidlaw 2002:315). Freedom however is a slippery concept with 'implicated philosophical problematics' which some scholars have recently addressed by the means of 'an inquiry at the level of ontology — a borderland inquiry' (Mattingly et al 2017: 13). The struggle between freedom and constraint explored by Laidlaw (2002) is synthesized by Jackson's understanding of two different senses of morality: 'Whereas the first reflects a consciousness of being different from others, the second reflects an awareness of what one shares with others — a *common* identity as a family, community, social class, ethnicity, or nation' (Jackson 2013b: 249). Academic debates on the issues of morality and ethics thus seem to intertwine and find a difficult terrain where to establish a universal reason (Herder 2004). Recent debates in anthropology and philosophy questioned the possibility of looking at the fundamentally existential question of ethics as an open ended, doubtful, contradictory, and indeterminate process (Mattingly et al 2017). As argued in *Moral Engines*, ethics cannot be conceived without reflecting on singular instances, empirical examples, and cultural variations [For further discussion see MacIntyre (1985) and Foucault (1997)]. Words and fixed structures which aim to define ethics often fail to encapsulate the meaning of an event, or the significance of a gesture.

Even for the people who experience particular events, words are at times just not enough to fully express them. The experience of ‘finding oneself without words’ is potentially possible to everyone: migrants, migration workers, locals, and anthropologists alike. Furthermore, ethical instances do not merely emerge from what we may perceive as being extraordinary or exceptional. Das (2015) argues for an anthropology in which a further understanding of ‘ethics’ is not based upon exceptional or extreme situations. According to Das (Ibid), an anthropologically grounded form of ethics is to be explored within the ordinary of the everyday, the apparently obvious and banal life of common persons (Fassin 2013). In this section, I take ethics as an intersubjective process of being into the field, embedded into an existential understanding of ethnography, that is primarily based on the value of doubt,

‘for it is through the loss of firm belief that one stands to gain a sense of belonging to a pluralistic world whose horizons are open – a world in which no one has the right to exercise power in the name of what he or she considers to be true and good, a world in which differences are no longer seen as obstacle to overcome but aporias to be accepted’ (Jackson 2013b: 11).

In Lampedusa, the ordinary is embedded into a particular form of normalization within the state of exception, where a general condition of socio-cultural, economic and political abandonment is silenced by an emphasis on a state of humanitarian emergency that has gained an increasing resonance all over the world. Through a retrospective self-critical analysis, based on particular ethnographic examples and reflections during my field in Lampedusa, I will discuss how in contexts situated at the limit, the extraordinary dissolves in the ordinariness of the exception. As a consequence, a new ethical moral order is determined, so that what at first might appear as ‘absurd’, soon acquires the attributes of normality. The process of normalization of exceptional situations takes a speed which can be destabilizing. Ethics in Lampedusa can no longer exist as a purely abstract philosophical discourse. Current debates on the anthropology of ethics already expressed how both philosophical and anthropological approaches often failed to work toward a common understanding of the ethical. While philosophers stressed the weaknesses of an anthropological approach, many anthropologists often built their theories on philosophy’s empirical untenability. Yet, ethics is in fact the marriage of anthropological instances and metaphysical questions. It is the often confusing, indeterminate, and doubtful border terrain between everyday experience and the existential meaning it carries within. In *Signatura Rerum* (The Signature of all things) Agamben (2008) refers to the distinction of meaning between the Latin words *exemplar* and *exemplum*. While the former referred to what ‘was good to imitate’, the latter held a more intellectual and moral connotation (Agamben 2008: 20). Foucault,



argues the Italian philosopher, refers to the concept of paradigm as a marriage of the two terms, and thus as a unification of the practical example and the moral conception. As a result, morality is embedded into the methodological discourse. ‘Ethnographic analysis may further disturb long-standing distinctions between reflection and everyday practical immersion... by exploring how reflection can occur precisely through immersion in practical life (Mattingly et al 2017:17). In some forms, ethics constitutes the cognitive paradigm upon which method is based. In contexts at the limit as it is the case of Lampedusa, we have responsibility toward the context we write about, the trust of those who opened up to us, the hopes of some, the unacceptability of some people’s conditions of living, and others’ situations of surviving (see chapter VI). Such ethical responsibility, which depends upon an introspective dialogue, and the ultimate determination of the anthropologist’s position, is the result of field-life. If being an anthropologist is to recognize one’s human form, the process of recognizing the researcher’s fallacy and weakness becomes central to the ethical question in ethnography.

## Ethical judge

I experienced my first migrant landings with anxiety and fear. The experience of ‘being there’, as Marcus (1988) nicely puts it, meant to see the disconcerting fragility of those who had been rescued at sea, listening to their voices and meeting their silences. Exchanging smiles and glances, offering hot tea, fruit juice and snacks, or just staying still with folded arms, witnessing the endless walk of Gambian men, Somali women, or Nigerian children, who just got off the boat; barefoot, sometimes wet, limp, many others injured. It meant becoming an impotent observer in the face of a human tragedy, where the protocol establishes what must or must not be done. From an ethical perspective, one might wonder whether our very presence on that pier, in most cases to observe, as a spectator of practically very little use, can have any real importance. The answer lies on how we define what is or is not important, and for whom it may be.

In what I would call ‘emergencies of the emergency’, when an unusually high number of migrants were brought to Lampedusa, wet and exhausted by their post-rescue journey, I managed to help some volunteers distributing thermal blankets, and creating a human corridor with the cultural mediators, who started helping by supplying snacks and hot drinks. Exceptional moments of collaboration between EASO and MH, times of togetherness for a common purpose, these are moments where, as an anthropologist, one may feel the obligation to cover a role which goes beyond that of mere observer. I had to follow the protocol, the orders, and the ways in which work at the pier was normalized, and so I described it, in one of my first landings:

‘The first patrol boat arrives, and everyone gathers around the pier. “They’re coming. They’re here: come on, come on.” It’s incredible to think of the dynamics I’m both witnessing and also taking part in. We [some cultural mediators and myself] wait at the pier. We wait. Often with impatience, sometimes with annoyance, at other times with worry, but we wait for them to arrive. We wait to take pictures, to see, to know, to welcome, to get rid of those snacks which are already open, and nobody knows who to give to anymore, to make sure that everyone is healthy, to check that everything is going ahead as planned. We all wait together and while we wait we make jokes, we laugh, we talk about football, we think about what to do later that day, we live our normal life which will soon come face-to-face, albeit only for a short amount of time, with the lives of those we have been anxiously and nervously waiting for...’ (Fieldnotes 17/05/2016).

As the ethnographic excerpt suggests, judgment is an integral part of being an anthropologist in borderland situations. I judged the people I spent time with, more or less willingly and self-consciously, by believing that agency and patience could be recognized by a first glance. The experience of migrant landings was emotionally draining, yet, I could not find the right words to express it, each time. According to Crapanzano (1992), the godly figure of the anthropologist Hermes, is a myth, which importantly fails to maintain its efficiency in understanding and making sense of reality. The anthropologist,

‘cannot simply repeat the message he had heard. (Even direct quotation requires reframing.) He has to understand the message, to interpret it, translate, contextualize, and elaborate it, and he has to justify all these procedures’ (Crapanzano 1992: 3).

Drawing on Crapanzano’s provocation, one might wonder how could we imagine a form of comprehension that escapes judgment, since even the least ethical person inevitably poses ethical judgments on his/her daily life, based on what should or should not be done? At the same time, judgment cannot be isolated from the position from which one is standing. Ethnographic work allows the researcher to open up to ‘other possibilities’ and to take different perspectives (Crapanzano 1992); to have a very special viewpoint, that is not common, and that can provide a wider, multi-sited vision of reality. In practice and in experience, taking the ethnographic task seriously can be destabilizing. It requires the capability to observe, a critical spirit, and it calls for introspection. Anthropologists often lack the courage to accept a shift of perspective, in particular as it concerns the ethical or moral realm. Shortly after the above ethnographic account, where I expressed a clear sense of disapproval toward the position of most migration workers at the pier, I found myself personally facing a further dilemma.

## Struggling against normalization of exceptions

Moral judgment becomes ethical prejudice. Ethical prejudice is the presumption of being able to describe, translate, or interpret the other, in his or her intentions, thoughts, and what determines them. The presumption I had of migration workers being insensitive to the migrants' vulnerable conditions, is no different from the one that others can show when 'judging' the researcher, as I previously mentioned. The forms of closure and limitation to knowing that I seemed to be suffering from in the field were not dissimilar to those I was imposing on the people I met. I judged, and I was judged. As Crapanzano puts it, 'the fact that all cultural facts are interpretations, and multivocal ones at that, is true both for the anthropologist and for his informant, the other with whom he works' (Crapanzano 1992: 151). Both participants and anthropologists struggle for interpretations of life worlds, which are not necessarily separate, but rather they intermingle with one another (Jackson 2013b). Judgment and prejudgment are then aspects of misunderstanding and superficial knowledge. Experience offers the opportunity to re-evaluate one's position, to widen one's thinking, and to give fluidity to a prevalently rigid understanding of the reality of fieldwork.

After months on the island, spending most of my evenings with mediators and doctors, and attending almost every landing, my own perspective slowly began to change. What on the theoretical and ideological level first seemed inconceivable, were to become an integral part of ordinary conversations and daily experiences. Ethics was no longer a hypothesis of the good, or supposition of the inconceivable. Instead, it increasingly became an integral part of the common experience, resting on one's possibilities to act, to remain silent, to recognize one's inefficiency and powerlessness, and so to come to terms with it. My aim was not that of finding out what one should or should not do. Rather, it was to explore the ways in which we all were, in different moments and forms, involved into the making of an ethical or less ethical reality, through our actions, thoughts, silences, perceptions, decisions. Within a plausible ethical dilemma, rested an ordinary practicality of common life, a reality of living that escapes any theorization and idealization of good and evil. Once more, the anthropologist's role did not stand as a mere theoretical discourse. The role of the ethnographer soon became tangible proposition to be addressed. What did it mean to write about Lampedusa's reality according to ethics? Whose ethics?

Standing by the sufferers' side seemed to be the best way to manage the field. Blinded by the idealism of impartiality, I did not want to take any particular position in the field. Of course, a position was eventually taken fairly spontaneously. There were people now normalized in their dehumanizing

work, others who were victims of the border-spectacle. My role, I thought, would be that of representing the realities I was facing in experience:

‘Theirs are the bodies of defeat, bodies of pity, bodies of suffering. They are bodies of need, bodies of silence, bodies veiled by the taboo of exploitation, torture, violation of human rights, by the inhumanity of humans. They are the bodies speaking as the scene rest silent. And these bodies are captured by photographic machines, videos and careful eyes that observe, quickly, from one detail to another. They are nothing other than bodies of fortunate misfortune, migrant bodies, coming back to reaffirm themselves, with their common traits, landing after landing, experience after experience... (Fieldnotes 26/09/2016).

An ethical sense then emerged as a struggle against the normalization of the exception I had already felt happening within myself. Writing would be my most profitable form of redemption from my superficial judgments, an attempt that as I would soon understand, was only approximate.

### Facing other selves

‘Coming back home, I receive a phone call. There will be a new landing tonight, and as usual, it will be at Favaloro Pier. They are in 200, all in relatively good conditions, it seems. A strong sense of discomfort takes hold on me. “Another,” I think between myself, as I take off my shoes, after my day spent with some cultural mediators, talking about the deficient conditions of the CPSA. I am tired. Tired and listless. I only feel like being at home, alone, far away from everyone and everything. I don’t want to see, I have seen enough already. I have seen those scenes, those persons.<sup>28</sup> I have seen the spectacle far too many times, and as I become addicted to it, I only want peace and solitude. And as I see my own reflection into the mirror, estranged by my own reaction, I wonder, and I try to understand why’ (Fieldnotes 22/07/16).

In his work, Pirandello explores the anxiety of uncertainty as a primary state of loss of his main character. As Bauman (1995) argues, this form of ethics is a fundamental element of the ‘liquidity’ of our times. In modern society, life is in fragments, and each piece is self-generating, to the extent that no individual is fully capable of having control upon what his or her potential influence may be. An anthropologist, as anyone who studies humanity, is not exempt from the flow of uncertainty that spreads and self-develops within the globalized world, a world ‘of continuous uncertainty... built of

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<sup>28</sup> In writing ‘those scenes, those persons,’ I was assuming a similar position of some locals whose tendency was to generalize and categorize the migrants as if ‘them those’ were all the same all the time.

the bricks of doubt and cemented with bouts of self-deprecation' (Bauman 1995: 3). Contemporary of our times, Jackson (2013b) reminds us, that ethnography is about the possibility to be surprised and to recognize oneself, through one's struggles, in moments of uncertainty, doubt, and great contradiction, where the stability of one's self can be challenged by experience, that is nothing more than the acute sensibility to the sense of perspective which regulates all human interactions. For Jackson (2013: 10), fieldwork

'can be so destabilizing that one has to fight the impulse to run for cover, to retrieve the sense of groundness one has lost. But it can also be the window of opportunity, a way of understanding oneself from the standpoint of another, or from elsewhere.'

Faced with the mirror of fieldwork, I then had to confront another myself. Something or someone whose existence I was not surely aware of, was emerging, and in showing itself, causing an irritating sense of uncertainty and unbalance. My incapacity to justify my experiences of the landing let me to moments of intimate ethical struggle. 'I have seen it', 'I have been there', I wrote, and as I retrospectively analyse what has happened, I recognize some of the dynamics described by Gatta (2006-2007) as forms of habitude to the arrival of migrants, with time all imagined as a categorical 'they', without being able to realize that although there were many migrants landing in Lampedusa, each person mostly did it once.

My response to such sense of ineptness left me numb, at times with no words, or logical plans of action. However, fieldwork itself was the cure; going out, watching the sea, meeting migrants, having long conversations with migration workers, were all paths for reflection and further understanding. I was not the first person who felt moved, horrified, and then exhausted by being part of what De Genova (2004) names as 'the spectacle of the border.' Confronting my experiences with migration workers, locals, and migrants, I could first realize that what I was feeling was not unique. Secondly, I could put things in perspective, and always be reminded of the various levels of injustice, suffering, and hardship, faced by the people I encountered, most importantly, the migrants.

In line with Jackson's call for new methodologies of representation, I hereby suggest that the experience of life at the borderlines requires an intersubjectively informed and introspective reflection on the very concept of the limit-situation. To my understanding, the beginning of this search for new methods of representation or presentation of life at the borderland consists in the realization of the limit of the researcher; it is founded on the process of humanization – which is the recognition of uncertainty and doubt. This self-realization is an act of responsibility with the self and with the reader. It is a moment where the trickster who resides in Hermes steps back for a moment, in reflection. When so much is at stake, the trickster needs to take some time to process the message, and to make

sense of how much he is embedded and affected by it. His standpoint, his ideas, his ways of seeing life, his worldviews and experiences are of the same uncertain nature of the words, silences, and gestures of the people he works for.<sup>29</sup> Hence, through the ordinarily extraordinary ethics of ethnography, I have demonstrated the mystification of the anthropologist Hermes as a godly figure, showing his/her human nature; the weaknesses, influences, doubts and contradictions involved in conducting fieldwork in borderland situations.

## A Note on Ethics

A special note is needed for the ethical concerns relating to the life stories of torture, abuse, and death, and the potential risks of working with personal accounts, on the one hand, and public secrecy, on the other. For many of the young migrants I met, I was a person they could speak to during their mostly lonely days outside the CPSA, and in some instances, I would like to think, even a friend, as they have been for me. Some might have lied to me, quite understandably, hoping that I could help them to find an alternative way to enter Germany, or Sweden, rather than going back to the UK after their fifth or sixth attempt, but to me, it was not that important. After all, they were people of roughly my age, and some much younger than me, with a chance to tell their story, and the hope to succeed in a better future, after being smuggled illegally all the way to the Mediterranean Sea. Some migrants I have met asked me to write their stories and tell their names; however, the mechanisms regulating their legal entry to Italy and other European countries is particularly sensitive, and possible clashes between the accounts I heard from them, and the information they would have to give to the Territorial Commission when examined, could be used against them. Hence, I preferred to use anonymous names, protecting their identity while still allowing their narratives to find an expression in the written text. I used fragments of their stories, and moments of our conversations, to try conveying their sense of frustration, hope, and struggle for a better life, rather than focusing on proving or disproving what they were saying.

I am disturbed by the thought that some readers may use this work to claim that the issue of undocumented migration has been overly debated, and that we should stop talking about it, because by doing so, as they would argue, there is a risk of encouraging the industry of illegal migration. Although some of these critiques rightly point out that artists, researchers, or journalists have dangerously used tragic events inappropriately, voyeuristically and uncritically, silence is not the answer to others' uncritical work. The words, gestures, and narratives of the migrants, the migration

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29 'Anthropologists are certainly not immune to the spirit of their times... Ernest Gellner (1988) polemic against Geertz's hermeneutics and relativism, but... an anthropologist has to begin his research with an openness – a bracketing off, however unsuccessfully, of his prejudices – and pre-understandings' (Crapanzano 1992: 7).

workers, and the locals I have drawn from in this thesis, are traces of a partly forgotten history, fragments of a complex and hard to entangle reality. Hence, they must be treated with care, respect, and a deep sense of trust; trust for people whose lives have been torn by what we name as ‘undocumented migration’, and whose right to speak is always anterior to anyone else’s presumption to judge what they are saying. I believe that despite many researchers having highlighted the sensitive nature of the phenomenon, warning us of the risks of appropriating migrants’ voices for the sake of treating a critical and topical phenomenon, in this work I carefully and self-consciously worked to find the most appropriate form of writing for conveying migrants’ life experiences. As Simpson argues (2011: 387), ethics is also to ‘recognize that there is not one ethical moment in the research process — encapsulated in prior review by committee — but many others, the most important of which arise during fieldwork and writing.’ I tried to calibrate ethnography with theory, philosophical reflections with practical instances, and emotional stories with critically engaged analysis. Most of the migrants I met tried to express how they felt, what they believed in, and as a result, who they were. They were often aware of the stereotypes people may have about them, and they wanted to show that such ideas could not encapsulate all of them.

In the specific context of Lampedusa, individual information on the migrants, collected by Frontex agents, IOM members, EASO cultural mediators, and others working at the CPSA, could not be shared without authorization. Many migration workers maintained distance from me. Others revealed some aspects of the dysfunctional system regulating the life of the migrants inside the CPSA. Some opened up to me as trust and friendship developed, but as I am aware of the sensitivity of the material they wished to share with me, I responsibly decided to anonymise them, and also to change some of the details concerning their nationality or age. I did the same for the locals, although some of them asked me to use their real names. However, they often contradicted themselves, asking me whether I would actually use their name in the book with a worrying tone. Roughly, there are five thousand inhabitants who live on the island, and it is fairly easy to track their identity. Hence, I carefully selected the material I used, avoiding writing compromising excerpts when I thought it was necessary. My presence on the island inevitably had an impact on the many elders in particular, not because they expected much from my research, but mostly because I kept them company, and made them laugh.

I also established important contacts with journalists working for National and International Press Associations, researchers from all over the world, established artists and writers, theatre performers and intellectuals, and members of organizations working in, or against the system of undocumented migration. I shared my thoughts, work, and interests with them. I collaborated on the art project ‘Corpo Comune’ by the artist Marisa Albanese and the photographer Claudia Mozzillo.

Some of my findings were included in the artist's publication 'Quaderno di Lampedusa' (Hoepli 2018), a text illustrated with pencil and pen sketches, to which I contributed with a short piece on 'Fear' on the island. Organizations such as MH, members of Askavusa, doctors and cultural mediators, EASO-FRONTEx and Misericordie Lampedusa, have engaged with my findings and are aware of the significant differences they are bringing to the surface when compared to existing literature. Their friendship allowed me to further comprehend something about the otherwise hidden and for me forbidden world of the CPSA, as well as the rescue operations in the Mediterranean. Furthermore, the personal relationships we established opened up a realm of difficulties, uncertainties, doubts, and ethical struggles; an existential situation that, together with the life experiences of the migrants and locals, lies at the foundation of critical writing and the holistic comprehension of what happens in Lampedusa.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the ethical process as a critique of the individual's positioning, with equal reference to doctors, migrants, cultural mediators, or researchers. Being able to challenge oneself, as it happened to me, when I critically reflected on my own positionality and ethical responsibility as a fieldworker and a person, — which means questioning in other words one's ontology — is key to the anthropological quest in borderland situations. The ability to recognize our own human fallacies allows for a broader ethnographic reading. The researcher's struggle to comprehend, the feeling of being unable to express the suffering of those who have been beaten, the emotional state of those who have journeyed across the sea, the ability of some to joke during their encounter with the migrants, and the need to escape from a place that, at times, feels like a 'mad prison'; these are all elements of a submerged truth that must emerge through ethnography.

In Lampedusa, the ethical and the moral cannot be analysed without first comprehending their contradictory and transformative properties. These are not only embedded in the lives of the people who live, work, or pass by the island, but also threaten to overwhelm the researcher. Starting from the existential debate on which Jackson (2008) builds his anthropological method, I ought to question the very concept of ethics. I do not put forward the assumption of being human — fallacious, uncertain, unstable, and contradictory at times — as a mere description of my methodological analysis. Instead, I reflect upon the process of estrangement and the moments of physical upheaval, as a method of knowledge, which is based on shared and (inter)constituted forms of ethics. As I have already argued, in the present ethnography, uncertainty and instability become forms of paradigm, and as such, repeatable examples upon which the possibility of knowledge can be erected. Knowing



the field is dependent on interest in the growth process: the transformation and questioning of the self (Cohen 2000; Jackson 2013b). The encounter with realities that do not seem comprehensible cannot be analysed without being able to critically reflect on what we once were, are, and have become during fieldwork. Standing as a supreme judge, taking the defender's role, recognizing oneself as part of the non-ethical, and seeing one's own human reflection – at times ideally altruistic, and at others more practically egoistic, is part of the ethical process I am referring to. Comprehending that method is not necessarily an instrument for certainty, and being able to abstract doubt as the paradigm of knowledge is a first fundamental step towards what Jackson defines as 'existential anthropology'. Taking a phenomenological approach does not merely mean using terms that refer back to experience, attempting to resemble Dewey's understanding of the experiential, or Sartre's existentialism. Rather, it means reflecting on them, being able to make connections, and allowing our own experience to guide our knowledge towards a very similar, or perhaps completely different marriage between what others have thought and what has not yet been said.

The recognition of the anthropologist's humanity, Hermes' lowering of his wings, stands as the primary event, the archaeology of method, the deconstruction of truth via analysis and introspection, that further reveals the substantial mechanisms through which knowledge is ultimately produced. This I call methodology. Not a definite answer to knowledge, but the possibility of doubting, surprising and being surprised, recognizing rather than dismissing one's fallacy. In these terms, ethics is not about the quest for an ultimate answer; rather, it is the procedure and the (self)reflection on the ways in which the ethnographic process of knowledge production in 'exceptionally' ordinary fields, such as Lampedusa, is determined. The contradictions between what appears to be real, and what emerges ethnographically from long term research, will be highlighted in the following Chapter, in which I will discuss how State presence following dramatic events, like the death of hundreds of migrants off the shores of Lampedusa in October 2013, determines a widespread sense of abandonment among most locals and undocumented migrants.

## Chapter II ‘A false reality of a pitiable lie’

In this chapter, I analyse the different trajectories of abandonment in Lampedusa, to explore the plural spaces of marginality experienced by both locals and migrants in relation to the State, their struggles for recognition, and the ways in which their existence has been shaped by the unfolding of tragic events. I will focus on the ambiguities accompanying memorial events such as the ‘3<sup>rd</sup> October,’<sup>30</sup> unveiling its impact on the lives of witnesses and survivors. In several of his works, the philosopher Giorgio Agamben addresses situations where human rights are suspended for the sake of an emergency via the paradigm of the state of exception (Agamben 1995; 2003; 2015). The state of exception is the condition under which the law can be suspended in the name of emergency. ‘When the state of exception begins to become the rule,’ the space of the ‘camp’ is opened (Agamben 1995: 83). ‘Inside this spatial and temporal sphere, anything could happen as long as it was held to be *de facto* necessary according to circumstances (Shmitt, *Das Nomos*, p. 67, cited in Agamben 1995: 20).

In Lampedusa, Agamben’s notion of ‘the camp’ is manifested at various levels, with different intensity, and it concerns multiple individuals. This chapter will describe how some of these spaces are experienced by locals and migrants in relation to the State. Later, I will report the story of H., a survivor from the 3<sup>rd</sup> October shipwreck, who came to the realization that he had become an object of political manoeuvres and the subject of abandonment. The testimony will highlight how the ambiguous relationship between law (the identification of dead migrants) and life (the existential state of being of the migrants that survived the shipwreck) emerges experientially and influences one’s sense of being-in-the-world, in states of emergency (Agamben 1995).

### ‘This event should not only help us to remember’

Lampedusa, 10 a.m. Annamaria and I were in *via Roma*, trying to understand where the National memorial march in memory of the victims of immigration<sup>31</sup> was to start. ‘Piazza Belvedere’, the place indicated by somebody as the starting point, was overcrowded. We walked past two of the survivors from the 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2013 shipwreck, in which approximately 368 migrants died off the coast of Lampedusa. They were both members of the ‘Comitato 3 ottobre’, a non-lucrative organization that was founded following the disaster. The commemorative march began with the Carabinieri leading

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30 The ‘Comitato 3 ottobre’ (3rd October Committee), takes its name from the date of the shipwreck in 2013.

31 Following the shipwreck off the shores of Lampedusa that occurred early on the morning of the 3rd October 2013, the “National day in memory of the victims of immigration” was declared by the Senate of the Republic on 16th March 2016.

the way, followed by the mayor, Giusi Nicolini, the group of survivors who had returned to Lampedusa for the event, journalists, locals, and tourists. Mayor Nicolini introduced the event with the following statement:

‘This event should not only help us to remember, to cry for or think about those who died. They were no different from the others who survived. Like them, they had dreams and hopes, but the right to dream and to have a future should not be negated to anyone. I invite you to experience this day as a moment of reflection and as a fight, a fight to change things ... the behaviour of some European countries is unjust. It’s inhuman and useless, and it only increases the number of casualties.’

The mayor’s speech was greeted with applause. She focused on two major themes: the first was the recognition of migrants’ human rights;<sup>32</sup> the second was a call for political change, a call to Europe, which, instead of building its politics on life, was abandoning the Italian Government to a single-handed and tragic rescue mission. Mayor Nicolini called for collaboration based on humanity, as opposed to the ‘inhuman...behaviour of some European countries’, although she did not specify which. On this Memorial Day for the victims of the shipwreck, the emergency that she ‘accused’ Europe of ignoring was self-evident: thousands of innocent people whose rights had been legally and politically suspended (Lucht 2011), were losing their lives in the waters of the Mediterranean during the crossing to Europe. Mayor Nicolini’s speech ended. She made it clear to all journalists that she was not the one to be interviewed. ‘The main characters’ on that day were ‘the survivors of the shipwreck,’ she said. However, a few minutes later, there she was, surrounded by journalists, on the frontline of the march. As Annamaria<sup>33</sup> noted, she stood *à la* Evans-Pritchard with the Azande,<sup>34</sup> in front of them — the migrants, victims, survivors, protagonists — at the head.

As I walked with the demonstrators, I observed and was observed by Lampedusani sitting outside the cafés. Elderly women were watching what was going on from their windows, and shop owners were taking photographs and videos while standing in their shop doorways. Everyone was walking, chatting, singing, or pushing to reach for someone, as many of the journalists did, in order to take the right photo or film the most telling moment. Some became angry, impatient, frustrated. They competed to interview the mayor and the survivors of the shipwreck. During a touching speech and prayer for the victims made by an Eritrean priest next to Porta d’Europa<sup>35</sup>, I noticed a well-

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32 See in particular Article 1, Article 2, and Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

33 Annamaria Fantauzzi is an anthropologist who worked on the religious rituals of death in Lampedusa and was with me during the ceremony of the 3rd October.

34 Annamaria was referring to the well-known picture of Edward E. Evans-Pritchard as he stood with the Azande people he had worked with during his fieldwork in Polynesia. In anthropology, the picture represents the image of the Western Eurocentric anthropologist.

35 Porta d’Europa, or Door to Europe, is a monument dedicated to the migrants who died and disappeared in the Mediterranean Sea. It was created by Italian artist Mimmo Paladino, and stands at the southern-most corner of Lampedusa, the European portion of land that is closest to Africa.

dressed journalist. He was walking away from the stage followed by a camera operator, and swearing at someone at the phone. On one side were bowed heads, women on their knees, crying eyes. On the other there were ironed uniforms, and journalists in smart jackets who walked away angrily.

In the meantime, I noticed another group of survivors from the shipwreck. They stood apart from the other two groups described. I photographed eleven of them, nine men, and two women. They were holding up six posters, thanking the people of Lampedusa; one in particular, held by a woman and written in Italian, caught Annamaria's attention. It read, 'We ask for the bodies of our brothers, our sisters, and our children to be brought back home' (Figure 2).



**Figure 2: Survivors from the 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2013 holding up posters during the memorial ceremony**

Two similar but very different demands were being voiced. From the stage, Mayor Nicolini was calling for the recognition of migrants as people who have exactly the same rights as everyone else, because life cannot be left politically adrift. On the other “stage,” in a less spectacularized space, a small group of survivors from the 3<sup>rd</sup> October shipwreck were bearing witness to the fact that real recognition of the dead migrants had yet to take place. For the survivors, the repatriation and burial of the shipwreck victims was the most fundamental right - the right to return home. While the State shows particular concern over the return of migrants to their homeland, or in other words, the ‘deportation of illegal migrants’, the repatriation of bodies<sup>36</sup> — ‘repatriation of remains’ — appears to be a secondary concern. As most of the bodies are non-identified, where would they be sent? Despite the promising words of Mayor Nicolini, three years after the tragedy, the survivors of the shipwreck still came to Lampedusa. They came from Germany, Sweden, and England, where they now live, in remembrance of that tragic day, demanding justice and help for the Lampedusani from the State. Rescuers and undocumented others have become first participants in a long term political and moral debate, where a panhuman reconsideration of humanness among migrants and citizens of

<sup>36</sup> That have drowned in the Mediterranean Sea.

the EU is opposed to political maneuvers aimed at delimiting the State's responsibilities and failures in saving the lives of migrants, rejecting them, or managing forms of reciprocally beneficial inclusion (Ben-Yehoyade 2015). While celebrating the memory of the victims and publicly showing great solidarity to the living survivors of the shipwreck, the Italian government never took responsibility for ensuring what the old cemetery gate-keeper Vincenzo referred to as a 'dignified burial'<sup>37</sup> of all the victims.

As we sat in the café, Marco, a local photographer in his fifties expressed his anger, bitterness and suspicion of those who used Lampedusa, 'those who orchestrated, and are still orchestrating the spectacle of death and horror.' 'Politicians, powerful people,' were mainly responsible for decades of unjustifiable death but, Marco added, there were other responsibilities among the police forces, migration workers, and ordinary people like himself. Scholars of migration wrote about Lampedusa as a border spectacle (Cuttitta 2012), where migrants have become subjects and objects of political discourses (Ravenda 2012) which interpreted their dreams, rationalities, and life decisions in relation to the political and economic interests. As Cuttitta (2012: 14) argues,

'the process of "frontierizzazione"<sup>38</sup> of Lampedusa transformed the island into an ideal stage for the representation of what we can define as "the border spectacle", a series of events, images, and discourses, constantly presented to the public by the media to reinforce and justify political choices, fostering hate, frustration, compassion, and fear towards the objectified images of undocumented migrants' [My translation].

However, referring to Lampedusa merely as a 'stage of spectacles' would be reductive. As Andersson (2014) shows, the border spectacle has a double edge: while one consists of visual images and humanitarian or securitarian discourses adopted by politicians and institutional figures in extraordinary circumstances (like the 3<sup>rd</sup> October Memorial Day), the other emerges in everyday life at the border. Considering the latter, the 'relational character of human existence that Heidegger called being-in-the-world (Dasein)' (Jackson 2013b: 24), in the chapter I deploy a phenomenological approach which allows me to reveal the various gradients of abandonment Lampedusa generates (for shipwreck survivors, rescuers and locals as I will show through the chapter), and the fact that one is inherently a condition of the other.

The words of mayor Nicolini and the experiences of locals, first rescuers, and victims of the 3<sup>rd</sup> October would reveal the inherent gaps between these two realities. As a result, political interest and/or presence appears in experience as a shared condition of absence. The peace and calm among

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37 For Vincenzo, the bodies of migrants buried in communal coffins, with no official identification, did not receive a dignified burial.

38 Construction of a frontier

the inhabitants of Lampedusa reveals a shared sense of abandonment by the institutions. The militarization of the island maintains a space that recalls the paradigm of the state of exception (Agamben 1995), where migrants live in detention and are unofficially allowed to exit the Hotspot as if they were invisible to the authorities (Gatta 2012). Migrants and locals appear in experience as different subjects, with diverse political possibilities, social contingencies, and personal needs, but they all share a deep sense of abandonment by State institutions. On the one hand, the migrants live in a limbo between free movement and an indefinite state of detention. On the other hand, the citizens of Lampedusa feel they are being treated as secondary citizens. In the next section, I dwell on the locals' ordinary experiences of exclusion from the mainland. Lampedusa's geographical distance from the mainland is experienced by the locals as a political and social distance from the State, which entails dysfunctional water supply services and insufficient medical care on the island. Thus, I will describe the locals' everyday struggles on the island, and the extent to which they feel abandoned by the State.

## Left to die

On a late April day of 2016, the old cemetery gatekeeper Vincenzo showed me with great concern the abandoned space right in front of his house, where a broken scooter stood on a corner. Weed was all over the place. He told me about the rats and the dirt that was left there, surrounding a small piece of land he had fenced himself to tend to his own little garden, with tomatoes, eggplants, and some prickly pears. He introduced me to his wife Anna, who explained that the situation in Lampedusa was not easy for the many.

Anna: 'When we need medical treatment, we must pay for the plane, find a place to stay for the time needed... The expenses are all on ourselves. Those who cannot afford it, will die.'

Anna's words reflect various forms of neglect suffered by many locals. Lampedusa's geographical distance from the mainland also appears as a political distance that can trigger locals' violent responses towards the migrants in extraordinary circumstances (despite the fact that neglect was a common experience of the inhabitants of Lampedusa even before the phenomenon of undocumented migration began.) These (extraordinary circumstances) most importantly rest on a shared sense of neglect by the State, which does not show particular care for locals' lives. In Lampedusa there was a *Poliambulatorio*, but people had to move to Sicily when they needed hospital treatment. Not everyone could afford paying for accommodation and travelling expenses; some asked help from relatives who

lived in Sicily or other parts of Italy, borrowing money, or sleeping at their place for the time needed, as Vincenzo's sister used to do. Some people simply gave up on medical treatments and kept living on the island. Pasquale<sup>39</sup> was one of them. He decided to stop medications for his cancer, because travelling was frustrating, and he wanted to live his life on the island, surrounded by friends and people who loved him. He died in 2016.

Whereas people died in Lampedusa, for many decades no one was born on the island. (Mazzara 2019). As the local artist Giacomo explained in his theatre piece entitled "Lampemusa,"<sup>40</sup> 'children once were born on the island with the help of a midwife, but nowadays this cannot happen anymore. In the past thirty years mothers must move to Sicily in order to give birth to their babies.' This undermines Lampedusani's sense of identity, because for them, a real Lampedusano must be born in Lampedusa. Fragapane, the historical mayor of Lampedusa during the 1980s and 1990s, referred to this situation as 'a purely anthropological fact, a major problem' for the Lampedusani. For Fragapane, the impossibility to be born on the island was perceived by the inhabitants as a fundamental form of neglect by the institutions.

As Vincenzo's wife Anna cleaned some mackerels for lunch time on that April day, the old cemetery gate-keeper told me about 2011, during the three months when, following the Arab Spring and subsequent refugee waves, Lampedusa hosted five to ten thousand migrants, mostly from Tunisia. The year is generally recalled as a tough time by the locals, because the CPSA did not have the capacities to host the migrants, who had to sleep inside abandoned cars, on the streets, and when they were lucky, hosted in locals' houses. Many in Lampedusa worked hard to provide food and shelter for as many people as they possibly could, because the CPSA could not assist all migrants. Dozens of Lampedusani set a long table by the Post Office, where Vincenzo lives, and invited the migrants to enjoy their food. 'We served food even in the evening, and since they could not eat pork,<sup>41</sup> we gave them other food.' Anna's clarification expressed locals' sense of hospitality, based on showing particular care towards a guest's needs and desires. They did not just set tables on the streets and cooked plenty of food but showed care in making food that they could eat.

Anna smiled. 'It was nice, such a nice time. And I'm very happy for what we did here in Lampedusa. For what we could do, I am proud and happy, in God's eyes.' Vincenzo and Anna were Christians, and they believed firmly in God. She thus explained that the problem for Lampedusani did not concern welcoming migrants. 'We don't need a recognition for what we have done for migrants. We only want to be treated as normal citizens, as Italian citizens.' The Mediterranean

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39 Well known architect, master shipwright, and musician in Lampedusa. He built his house out of the objects abandoned by the locals.

40 Lampemusa is a word-game on the name Lampedusa. "Musa" means "muse". Lampedusa is the title of a show performed inside Askavusa's cave and around Italy by local storyteller and artist Giacomo Sferlazzo.

41 The majority of migrants from Eritrea whom I met in Lampedusa are Muslim and do not eat pork.

hospitality, observed as a tacit social contract which must have a return, even if through other forms, and in time, stands upon a fundamental preposition: the recognition of one's rights as a "normal" member of a community; as an "Italian citizen." (Ben-Yehoyade 2015). Vincenzo and Anna had contributed to helping the migrants in 2011, and this gave them a sense of proudness and personal satisfaction. However, for most locals, what mattered most was to be treated as "normal citizens" should be.

### Mors tua vita mea (your death, my life)

On top of the dysfunctional system regulating Lampedusani's ordinary life on the island, the State management of migrants' flows to the island can significantly impact on locals' frustration and lack of recognition. This was elucidated by Nino's stories on the events of 2011.

'Everything changed when numbers of migrants grew, and the media discourse had an impact on the economy of the island, that was mainly based on tourism.' Explained Nino. 'In 2011, when locals became a numerical minority, there were more Africans than Lampedusani, and panic broke out. There were fights at the fuel pump and police intervened. Half an hour before the accident, policemen went to Nino's Archivio Storico<sup>42</sup> and asked him to shut it down, because soon something would have happened. A lot of chaos that day. Angry Lampedusani who physically attacked a group of Africans, by throwing stones at them and assaulting them. It all began some time before, when a group of Tunisians were sent back to Tunisia and not Italy, causing the general alarm for the migrants kept on the island, who feared they were being sent back to their countries, and protested on the streets.'

The chaotic events described by Nino were generated by the political decision in 2011 according to which a growing number of migrants were kept on the island of Lampedusa for roughly three months, without an immediate intervention in resettling the migrants to several locations on mainland. As Cuttitta (2012) writes, the emergency was determined by a series of political manoeuvres which caused protests and fights within the island and offered an ideal stage for politically charged mediatised events. In the episode of locals' violence against migrants to which Nino referred to, multiple causes were responsible for the event. As Nino explained, in such a small context, serenity could be turned to struggle, and peace in chaos. Lampedusani threw stones at a crowd of migrants, beat them with sticks, and injured many of them, along with the police agents who were charging against the migrants. Before the event, several thousands of migrants were left by the State on the

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<sup>42</sup> Archivio Storico di Lampedusa is a privately collected archive of historical, archeological, and photographic material, as well as music, documentaries, and several kinds of books on Lampedusa, showcased in a space open to the public roughly from March to November every year.



island for up to three months, without a safe place to sleep, eat, and meet their hygienic necessities. The authorities tried to ensure them that they would soon leave the island, but no authorization was given for them to be transferred. Locals felt abandoned by the State, and with time, frustration towards the migrants' unregulated presence on the island grew. The interpersonal balance among the locals and the migrants living in Lampedusa had been tipped off in 2011, and many Lampedusani feared that it could happen again. When primary necessities are threatened, the principle of *mors tua, vita mea*,<sup>43</sup> stands as a Latin expression of people's difficulties to resolve anxieties, worries, and everyday problematics. This is what happened during the migrants' protests of 2011, when locals and migrants, exasperated by the unbearable conditions in which they had been left to live, became violent with one another. Exceptional events like the ones of 2011 were extraordinary expressions of how a place could be turned into a frontier, and how a frontier could provide the conditions for chaos among its inhabitants: hitting migrants with stones and sticks was an extraordinary and uncommon behaviour for the locals.

Hospitality, which is part of locals' sociality, and extends beyond geographical, cultural, and linguistic barriers, undergoes then a fundamental crisis when the hosts feel that their (existential) ground has been pulled from beneath their feet (Jackson 2013a). When they feel threatened, a self-protective reaction is triggered, and sharing a meal and having a good time with the migrants becomes secondary to locals' need of being recognized by the State. However, according to Vincenzo and Anna, what truly bothered most locals' everyday life, was something else. 'Of course, welcoming migrants is not a bad thing. You know that. I was the first doing it in Lampedusa, I never asked help from anyone, and I ask nothing in return.' As the old cemetery gate-keeper, Vincenzo had for many years buried bodies of dead migrants retrieved off the shores of Lampedusa, fought for their rights to have a dignified burial in the cemetery, and brought fresh flowers to them. 'But, if the water is missing,'<sup>44</sup> he said, 'and nobody cares about it, or if one of us gets sick and doesn't have the money to leave, we are left here to die. If we were migrants, they would take us. Then you see, what shall we do? Something is wrong here.'

## Inclusive Exclusion

As illustrated earlier on, mayor Nicolini called for equality on the stage of the Memorial Day of the 3<sup>rd</sup> October. However, drawing on Vincenzo and Anna's words, locals in Lampedusa share a deep sense of inequality from Italian citizens living elsewhere. When they compare their everyday access

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43 *Mors tua, vita mea*, is a Latin medieval expression, and it can be translated in English as: 'your death, my life', or, 'your loss is my gain.'

44 Water supply often abruptly stops working, and portions of the island houses hardly have water for hours, or days, intermittently. Some locals used water tanks to save water, but many others, could not afford them.

to facilities, and struggle for medical treatment or water supply, to the situation of Agrigento and Palermo (in Sicily), or Turin (in Piedmont region, northern Italy), where many of their relatives have emigrated, they feel abandoned.<sup>45</sup>

As Vincenzo and Anna's stories revealed, locals who are left alone to face medical difficulties — without enough financial support from the Region Sicilia and the State — face the risk of dying. This condition of “being left to die” is reminiscent of Agamben's (2003) paradigm of the *homo sacer*, or bare life, whose status is conditioned by varied forms of abandonment exercised by the sovereign power. But abandonment, as Agamben argues, is never just exclusive. It rather excludes by including targeted groups of people. The presence of the State is nothing but an illusionary façade through which such processes of inclusive exclusion takes place. On the one hand, the State shows its constant presence through military surveillance, ceremonial events, memorial days, political gatherings, naming specific events, interviewing locals, representing their stories, and showcasing their emotions. On the other hand, as many on the island complain, journalists and politicians never really listen to what they have to say, and their words are misused to tell other stories. Such locally contested State's absent presence has determined through the years spaces of abandonment where people had to wrestle for everyday needs, and in the worst situations, even for their own life.

As Vincenzo and Anna's words, supported by many of other locals suggest, political presence manifests itself through celebrations of tragic events, calls to Europe, and promises of protection and solidarity towards the victims and the Lampedusani. However, most of the locals explain that ultimately, their everyday lives have not changed, their voices have not been heard, and their struggle has not been alleviated. The spectacular “emergency” showcased during the ceremony of the 3<sup>rd</sup> October — resting on the State necessity of avoiding migrants' deaths collaboratively with the EU — belongs to a ceremonial and political discourse that conceals an actual state of contempt towards Lampedusani, praised as heartfelt, but at the same time treated as “secondary citizens.”

As a result, locals are mostly untrusting of journalists, researchers, politicians, and migrants themselves, because every effort they have made to be cooperative is perceived as a vain attempt to be heard. Lampedusani's sense of abandonment rested on their condition of being caught in a political and humanitarian discourse which uses Lampedusa as its favourite stage for enacting the emergency of migration without considering their voices, needs, and their own sense of “emergency.” This “emergency” rests on locals' wrestling for being recognized by the State as Italian citizens should be. Instead of justifying itself by calling for humanitarian or securitarian interventions within extraordinary events, locals' emergency rests on ordinary life necessities. It does not aim at fulfilling

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<sup>45</sup> However, also in some areas of Agrigento and Palermo, and elsewhere in Sicily, people face water shortage, insufficient medical treatments, and poor infrastructures, if compared to Piedmont region, for example. Most Lampedusani's difficulties must be observed within an intricate Regional and National space of juxtaposed layers of abandonment by the State.

political promises of human equality, but it requires guaranteed medical assistance, a hospital, and a functional system of water supply. Most locals feel that they have been put beneath the migrants in the assistance they receive by the State. If their perception is correct — if they were really undocumented migrants in Lampedusa — what would they experience? In order to address this question, I will now turn to the migrants' everyday life on the island and observe the kind of spaces in which they live as detainees. The following ethnographic extracts will help to further explore other trajectories of abandonment observed among the island's inhabitants, and the impact that the State has had and still has on migrants' everyday life in Lampedusa.

## Detention and Surveillance

The main road of the island, *Via Roma*, was often crowded with elderly people, migration workers, members of Mediterranean Hope<sup>46</sup>, and migrants, spread across stone benches by the local café or right in front of the Church, and at times standing or walking on the road, generally in small groups. Most of the migrants wore bright coloured tracksuits, which were part of the clothing, hygienic kit and first needs goods provided by the CPSA.<sup>47</sup> The most common colours were blue, yellow, green and red.<sup>48</sup>

Migrants' clothes were often undersized or oversized. They wore flip flops, tracksuits and sneakers which could best suit them, according to the stock provided at the CPSA, which, as Vincent<sup>49</sup> said, 'most of the times was poor and did not meet the parameters agreed by the European Union.' Regardless of the season, one could often observe migrants walking barefoot, or with only one shoe. In the meantime, tourists came to visit the beautiful island, rented scooters and party boats, and partied at night. Together with the tourists were the migration workers, drinking their coffees at the cafes, meeting up for aperitifs at lunch time, in the afternoon, and in the evening. Migrants often went for baths to the beach. They occupied a marginal space, on the side rocks of the sandy Guitgia<sup>50</sup> beach, but they seemed to enjoy their time there. While locals sat at the cafés, and migrants on the benches of via Roma, often in silence, several vehicles of police, carabinieri, and Army's light armoured cars, drove around the island. The State manifested its presence through constant activities of surveillance. The impression was that the government had an absolute control of the business of undocumented migration. As a result, tourists could enjoy their time on the island, migration workers could fulfil

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46 Mediterranean Hope is an observatory for migration in Lampedusa, aimed at analysing, interpreting, and communicating via their web page migratory flows by a daily collaboration with religious authorities, locals, volunteers, and NGOs.

47 Migrants could be legally detained for procedures of identification, medical checks and other procedures for a maximum of 72 hours (Report on the Identification and expulsion centres - February 2016).

48 Colours represented in various combinations on the national flags of many of the states they originate from.

49 Eritrean Cultural mediator working for EASO.

50 The Guitgia beach is one of the most popular ones in Lampedusa.

their duties regularly, and locals could feel safe. The island of Lampedusa was protected. If on the one hand, many locals suffered the outcomes of a dysfunctional government, military protection was only apparently had to do with migrants' rights, needs, and ordinary difficulties.

The young Aleua, a migrant in his early twenties from Gambia who had landed in Lampedusa in April 2016, explained to me that migrants like himself could get out of the CPSA and get back in with no major problems, although it was not as easy as it seemed. Walking on *Via Roma* with Aleua, I started understanding that the mechanism of "free exit," as it could be perceived by an observer who was not too well informed on how the CPSA worked, was not simple.

A: 'We jump from the back, yes. But not everyone gets out. No'. Aleua said.

'Why not?' I asked.

'Because they do not have feelings [they don't feel like] to go out and walk.' [His expression changed]

I: 'Do you think so?'

'Yes.' [He smiled.] 'Also, because they are scared that police will see them and catch them. You know they have that thinking.' [Many migrants feared uniforms. They had experienced a "bad time" with soldiers and corrupted military forces during their journey at the frontier and in Libya, as he had told me.]

I: 'Well, I hear you.'

'Yes.' [He smiled again.] 'But here it's ok. They let you go and walk.'

Aleua's story revealed that undocumented migrants in Lampedusa lived as detainees, who could not easily exit the Hotspot, because it implied going against the rules, and risking being caught by the police. According to the CPSA's rules, its *guests*<sup>51</sup> were not authorized to leave the building. Guards constantly stood at the CPSA's gate of entrance, guardians of a place that was inaccessible for journalists, researchers, and varied humanitarian organization unless they held a permit. As several reporters had written in the past years, and Giacomo and Vincenzo told me since the first day we met, the migrants whom I had noticed walking by the island or sitting around, officially "escaped" from the CPSA. Behind the CPSA, nearby the dormitories, there was a hole through the high fences' metal net that was left there and never repaired. According to most people I spoke to on the island, the hole allowed the detained migrants to get out of the CPSA and come back in, freely.

This was the official story, as Nino told me, to further add that no one cared much about whatever would have happened to the *guests*. Their physical, as well as mental conditions, did not concern police and military agents monitoring the island. If some migrants wandered around, 'it was

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51 At the CPSA in Lampedusa, migrants are officially referred to with the technical language of "guests". I will at times refer to them by using the same name only to remind the reader of the language used by migrant workers themselves when they often refer to undocumented migrants, and some implications of using such terminology.

not their business’, repeated Nino, ‘because officially, these migrants escape from the back of the Centro.’ Theirs was an apparently free walk through *Via Roma* or by *La Guitgia* beach, constantly watched by the police force, but practically left and euphemistically abandoned to themselves.



**Figure 3. The abandoned road where migrants used to walk to exit the Hotspot from the backyard and return.**

Men and women, as well as adolescents, chose to remain inside the CPSA, and isolated themselves from the other migrants for entire days, some by remaining in silence, others by staring at the empty walls. Sometimes they did not go to the meals, and some doctors or cultural mediators, tried to convince them to eat and socialize with the others. The CPSA, with its peculiarly hidden position, easy to find for only those who knew where it was, represented a further isolated space in Lampedusa. Andersson (2014: 211) defined Ceuta as ‘nothing if not a liminal space, an “out-place” in Agier’s (2011) terms, artificially construed as the ultimate threshold of Europe’, where the ‘camp is a limbo-within-a-limbo’. Lampedusa’s Hotspot appeared to be an island within the island. Giacomo, a founding member of Asakusa and local artist, explained that:

‘In 1996 Italy becomes part of the Schengen agreements, with the Turco-Napolitano law<sup>52</sup>... and it establishes the first centres for migrants, where an ambiguous legal concept is introduced: ‘administrative custody’. This is a very dangerous norm, on which the path of migration is built.’

The enforced detention of undocumented migrants suspended migrants’ rights in a completely new way. As Giacomo explained, it allowed migrants to ‘be kept on the island for longer times’, although by law, the Hotspot of Lampedusa cannot host the migrants for more than seventy-two hours from their arrival. In fact, most of the migrants who landed in Lampedusa, spent several weeks, and at times months, on the island. Atta, for example, waited the day of his departure for three months. He was a man in his mid-twenties. He had three children and a wife who lived in Ghana, where he came from. He missed his family very much, Atta often told me. As he was brought onto the island, he quickly saw all his companions being transferred to Sicily, group by group. As transfers occurred and time passed, he began showing a growing sense of impatience, waiting for a departure without certain dates, and realizing to be entrapped again, after Libya, without knowing the terms and conditions of the detention. Two months had passed, and sitting on the rocks at the Guitgia beach, he said:

Atta: ‘Oh, my brother, it is far too long. But I don’t know what to do...I behaved very well inside [the centre]. I did not cause any trouble. But the people who caused trouble, who shouted and did bad things, those were sent away. People who behave in the right way are kept here, instead. Ah... I don’t know.’

The state of actual detention experienced by all migrants passing by Lampedusa, can lead to great frustration, because there is no acknowledgment of the crime which justifies such prolonged detention. For most migrants, being in Lampedusa is a time of uncertainty. From Atta’s words, it is evident that waiting in a state of abandonment for undocumented migrants is not easy to bear. Despite all his efforts to ask police officers and responsible at the CPSA about his situation, Atta had to wait, he was not entitled to know more than that. He was a “guest,”<sup>53</sup> and as far as the authorities were concerned, that was all he could know about his own state of being in Lampedusa. The rest was left to him. He was, as many others, abandoned in a loop of unanswered questions. Doubt and contradiction haunted his dreams, and the boat he long waited for, while staring at the open sea, was the only way for him to leave the island.

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52 Law established on 6 March 1998 n. 40, also known as Legge Turco – Napolitano (by the names of Livia Turco, then Minister of Social Solidarity, and Giorgio Napolitano, at the time Minister of Interior and later President of the Republic), proposes to regulate organically the entire issue of foreign immigration, aiming at overcoming the limbo of the state of emergency by favouring regular migration and discouraging clandestine migration to Italy.

53The term was used by the migration workers to officially refer to the migrants detained inside the CPSA. Since the approval of Turco-Napolitano law of 1998, undocumented migrants were euphemistically referred to as “ospiti” (guests)

In Lampedusa, migrants show a deep sense of powerlessness, and a growing mistrust toward a system, which, while seeming to fulfil all of their needs, turned out to be a further trap; a time trap. Time goes by while undocumented migrants wait, and its slowness is emphasized within a shared sense of abandonment. As Anderson (2014a: 20) writes in one of his most influential critiques to the temporal aspects of Europe's migration control, 'In Ceuta, migrants themselves were the first to notice the economic gains of encampment, in labelling (as some did) migration a "business" and their protest a "strike."' After Lampedusa, when migrants have to go through the legal procedures determining their documented status, their sense of abandonment and feeling of impatience pushes them to their limits.<sup>54</sup> Emergency does not reveal itself in its exceptionality and spectacularization of the extraordinary. Instead, it exists in the less evident spaces of the island, and it is masked by the peaceful atmosphere of conviviality. From the ordinary of the exceptional, an extraordinary form of abandoned truth — locals and migrants' lack of recognition in the face of indifference by the State — emerges as a truth floating over the waters of indifference.

## The Camp

States of exception are for Agamben becoming normalised paradigms of government, situations where there is 'a radical crisis of every possibility of clearly distinguishing . . . between exception and rule' (Agamben 1995: 14). In this sense, Lampedusa transcends the legal model of a Hotspot and determines itself as a space of exception, that 'very space in which the juridical-political order can have validity' (Ibid., 11). Migrants are detained beyond the stipulated limit of 72 hours inside the Hotspot and are unofficially allowed to exit from the "hole" at the CPSA's backyard. Surveillance is constant on the island, but its alert eye does not consider the needs of the many migrants, creating a general situation of frustration, impatience, and longing for escaping their status of detainees. On top of this, the hygienic conditions of sanitary facilities and dormitories have been reported to be unsatisfactory if not precarious; rooms that could contain four to six beds, host about thirty people. Medical checks are generally dependent on one general practitioner, an infectious disease specialist, a dermatologist, a paediatrician, some gynaecologists, and a few nurses, for a number of few hundred men, and fewer women and children.

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<sup>54</sup> Self-injury, peaceful protests, letters, interviews, and more or less extreme other forms of violence were reported through the years during the waiting time for undocumented migrants (Ravenda 2012; Askavusa 2018).



**Figure 4. Part of the Hotspot facilities of Lampedusa seen from the backyard's exit.**

Many migrants referred to the Hotspot as “the camp”. In his theorization Agamben specifies that if the camp is the space where the state of exception has been invoked, ‘we find ourselves virtually in the presence of a camp every time such a structure is created, independent of the kinds of crime that are committed there’ (Agamben 1995: 85). In Lampedusa, the space of the camp had definite boundaries, delimited by a gate constantly guarded by Police agents, and fences delimiting its area, because a state of exception had been invoked both inside and outside the CPSA. However, as migrants sneaked out through the hole on the back of the CPSA, on the streets of the island, and through the rocks of the Guitgia beach, the space of the camp extended in time and space. Some migrants did not feel like exiting the Hotspot, but even those who managed to do so, with time passing, felt a growing need of leaving the island. As migrants’ detention extended in time, the island itself turned into the camp where their rights had been suspended, and the state of exception had been normalized.

As Lampedusa was turned into first European frontier to handle the increasing number of migrants’ arrival from Africa, through the decades, people have died at sea. Their numbers have grown exponentially, both in terms of arrivals on the island, and people drowning in the Mediterranean (IOM 2018). The effective number of migrants’ deaths during the Mediterranean Sea crossing is not certain, because many boats went missing without a record. Up to the present time, and based on UNHCR documentation, dead and missing estimates in 2014 amounted to 3,538 persons, 3,771 in 2015, 5,096 in 2016, and 3,139 in 2017. At the beginning of October 2018, the estimate of dead and missing persons crossing the Mediterranean Sea is of 2,277. In June 2019, the total amount of dead migrants recorded is 1,055. For Lampedusa,

‘The tragedy of the 3<sup>rd</sup> October was a threshold. For the first time, people could see, rescue, and count many corpses on the European shores. The images of dead bodies floating at sea became



internationally known. There was even a stillborn just expelled, still tied to the mother with the umbilical cord. On the surface there were no corpses, but dead bodies were spread all over the place. In the hours immediately following the first images shown on TV, the world of international and European politics took over the island and paraded in front of the cameras.’ (Enia 2018: 148-149 [my translation]).

Three years after that exceptional event for the island and the European world of migration, migrants kept dying at sea in increasingly high numbers. As doctor Jacopo<sup>55</sup> explained to me, and Motou<sup>56</sup> confirmed in great detail, migrants landed on Lampedusa’s shores with chemical burns caused by the mixture of sea water and fuel that was created on deck, inside the boats used to cross the Mediterranean, where they had no space to move, or possibilities to escape. Women were pregnant after being raped multiple times during their journey. F., a few days following his arrival said,

‘When we got here in Lampedusa, after 2 days of travelling at sea, we were informed that 170 Eritreans died at sea before we arrived. The husband of a woman who was in my boat was there, and she started shouting and crying. Her husband was dead, at sea... 170 people died, at sea. Ahhh... many Africans are dying, many Africans, and their families will never know where they are. They will think they are in Europe, and they will wait for their call, but they will never know what happened.’

After a while, F. was staring at the sea, from the rocks of la Guitgia, and still suffering from thinking as what had happened to those who died at sea, he said, ‘Even now, you know, if I look at the open sea, sometimes I have tears in my eyes.’ Tears were trickling down his face. The water reminded him that the Mediterranean Sea could save some, but it could take many others. The stories of many migrants whom I met on the island revealed a reality of violence, injustice, and inequality which some of the elders whom I first met in Lampedusa seemed to disregard.

‘Here life is very good’

I met with two locals, Mr. M. and Mrs M. at their home in Lampedusa, waiting together for their son to discuss about a scooter I was going to rent. They invited me to sit down with them and, while we were waiting, I enquired about how life on the island is. Mrs. M. promptly answered that life was

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<sup>55</sup> Jacopo was a doctor hired by Misericordia di Capo Rizzuto, the cooperative managing the Hotspot on the island. He worked inside the Hotspot as one doctor, for periods of going from one to three weeks in a row. Doctors working with Misericordia did not exit the CPSA during their working week(s). They ate and slept inside the CPSA and were the main responsible for ensuring migrants’ medical conditions as they entered the Hotspot after landings.

<sup>56</sup> Motou was a nineteen years old boy from Gambia, who landed in Lampedusa in April and stayed for about one month. He was a carpenter and worked metals back in Gambia, but he also showed a great passion for boxing and rapping. His dream as he landed was to be capable of entering boxing competitions at a professional level, and was confident he could succeed, because he was not the strongest, he told me, but he knew how to stand up after being hit.

very good there, adding, ‘What did you think? That life was bad down here? No, no. Don’t worry. Life is good here. It is not England here, eh [reinforcing expression]. There they all hold guns. And then, you know nowadays, after all that happens. No, no. Here, life is very good.’

Mrs. M. did not know that in England guns were not permitted. She considered England an unknown and dangerous place, and she seems to be conflating it with the United States of America most probably, because Lampedusani who travelled by sea in the past, were hired on merchant boats and fishing ships in based in America. They returned to Lampedusa after months at sea and often rested on land for a few weeks, sharing their stories with family and friends. I was told by most of the elders of Lampedusa that many left travelling around America, while many others sailed to West African and South African ports. Mrs. M. spoke of a form of “good” life that inherently revealed contradictions I soon became aware of.

As the mayor called for a state of emergency to be declared during the ceremony of the 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2016, Lampedusa introduced itself as ‘an apparently innocuous space’ where everyone lives in harmony with one another. While military personnel when not in service played beach tennis, locals played volleyball, and migrants sat at the margins, an ambiguous zone of indeterminacy emerged. Migrants died at sea, suffered from chemical burns, rape, torture, and were detained inside the Hotspot of Lampedusa. The road leading to the Hotspot was arid, lonely, full of dry grass, stones, with some old cemented houses on the side. During his fieldwork in 2006-2007 in Lampedusa, Gatta (2012) already reports that the position of the Hotspot was intentional to keeping migrants in a marginal space within the island, that could be reached via a narrow road with hardly any traffic and remote from the town centre. The island had absorbed the Hotspot to make it practically invisible and uninteresting to anyone. No one held guns in Lampedusa according to Mrs. M., but military personnel were copious and constantly vigilant around Lampedusa’s streets. They held guns when patrolling the streets and wore swimming trunks when playing at the Guitgia beach. Normalising the exception emerged through such paradox; migrants walked freely on the beach where soldiers/perpetrators relaxed as if the ‘illegals’ whom they supposedly had to keep inside the CPSA were not there. In the meantime, migrants swam by the rocks of the Guitgia, or simply stood there to look at the sea.

In the light of such events, I agree with Jackson (2008) that an anthropological approach to borderland situations must consider the spaces of appearances which during fieldwork arise *in presentia* — the phenomena we experience. Such phenomena, Jackson argues, can be foregrounded or backgrounded, stand on the surface of our perceptions or lie back in less visible and unexplored realms of our senses. At that moment in time, Lampedusa was revealed to be a space where some elements of everyday life emerged more clearly, and others seemed to remain unnoticed, or unspoken, veiled by an apparent state of calm and well-being. When I first landed on the island, Mrs. M. told

me that life was very good in Lampedusa. ‘It’s not like England here.’ Later on, I would meet Vincenzo, Giacomo, Aleua, and Atta. Theirs were ordinary stories of abandonment emerging in the backgrounds of Lampedusa’s “good life” to which Mrs. M. referred to. What the old woman described as a good life — an imagined and idealistic depiction of everyday life on the island — rests upon the *exceptio* of the bare life (Agamben 1995); the unheard voices of many locals, and the conditions of detention and neglect that characterize migrants’ lives on the island of Lampedusa. For Agamben the *exceptio* of the bare life lies at the heart of Western politics, and ‘until a completely new politics — that is, a politics no longer founded on the *exceptio* of bare life — is at hand... the “beautiful day” of life will be given citizenship only either through blood and death or in the perfect senselessness to which the society of the spectacle condemns it (Agamben 1995: 7). For locals like Mrs. M. and Mr. M, maintaining the image of a good life on the island through their narratives was important to preserve their own sense of being well, despite of the many situations of inequality, injustice, and state absence which locals had widely experienced. It is to a further analysis of the inherent relationship between apparent State presence (“the beautiful day”) and the experiences of neglect suffered by the inhabitants of the island (the “blood and death”) required to achieve it, that I will reflect upon. The next section thus examines the price that some have to pay to maintain an apparently “good life” on the island of Lampedusa.

## The smell of death

I happened to hear about the victims of shipwrecks buried without a name, and a written record at the cemetery of Lampedusa during a meeting at the Forum Lampedusa Solidale.<sup>57</sup> On that day, Rita, a lawyer from Palermo who decided to abandon her profession and move permanently to Lampedusa with her husband, introduced Vincenzo’s story to the circle of people reunited at the Forum. She said that the old cemetery’s gatekeeper was perhaps the only living witness who knew some important details regarding the many young migrants buried without a name, a date, and any particular sign of identification. The cemetery of Lampedusa hosted the bodies of migrants who died off its shores since 1996, but many of their names were not written on tombs, nor were their age, stories, or anything helping to remember their identities.

Vincenzo was and still is a living witness of a very important portion of historical memory in Lampedusa. Despite his words and stories having been widely recorded and published as newspaper articles and photoreportage documentaries in Italy, France, and Germany, a detailed record of the

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<sup>57</sup> Platform managed by members of Mediterranean Hope in Lampedusa and aimed at tackling the complex problems concerning migrants’ rights and working on feasible proposals and solutions to the human trafficking in the Mediterranean.

people who died at sea and were buried in Lampedusa has not been officially produced. This section takes the title from Vincenzo's accounts of burying migrants' corpses retrieved at sea in the past decades. The smell of those bodies, he said, was unbearable, but even more unbearable, was to know that the State and the institutions had neglected the victims and witnesses of tragic events in Lampedusa.

I met Vincenzo with the help of Don Mimmo, who gave us a lift to the cemetery. When we got there, after entering through the main gate, Vincenzo stopped, and pointed at a small building next to the entrance. 'Do you see this thing here? Here is where they brought the first group of migrants to be buried, and Doctor Bartolo was here, "the Sir", who treated 250 thousand migrants all by himself, "he" treated them' he said succinctly. Following Gianfranco Rosi's docu-film *Fuocoammare* (Fire at Sea) (2016), Doctor Bartolo was publicly recognized as a hero. He had been interviewed in talk shows and participated to important debates on migration. Locals often referred to him as 'Bartolo, the doctor of Lampedusa.' Vincenzo could not bear the idea that Bartolo had been portrayed as the medical hero, constituting his public figure without mentioning all the others involved in rescuing, treating migrants, and taking care of dead bodies during the decades of undocumented migration in Lampedusa. 'But there were other doctors, like Doctor Pola<sup>58</sup>, who was with me that night. And the others haven't been mentioned. I remember the other doctors; you know Doctors without Frontiers (MSF). They worked so hard. They were here with me, working, talking to me, and no one mentioned them.' Vincenzo was profoundly disturbed by a growing public image of the "hero" attached to Bartolo, which according to him did not give justice to the shared experiences of suffering that he and the others had personally witnessed.

After entering the cemetery's gate, on the right, a narrow path led to two squares of land, about five meters square each, used for the burying of migrants who lost their lives in the Mediterranean. Vincenzo explained that the corpses of many migrants had been buried one above the other. 'There are three here, and four here', he said, pointing at a portion of the square of land, and then moving to the next. "*Fosse comuni*" (mass graves) was the name used by Paolo di Stefano in an article written in 2012 on *Corriere Espresso*. From the tombs of the cemetery, emerged randomly grown grass and some plants. Among the grass, there were several wooden crosses, all built and positioned with great care by the old cemetery gate-keeper several years before. Beginning from the first row on the left square of land, Vincenzo began telling his story.

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<sup>58</sup> Doctor Alessandra Pola is a psychiatrist who worked at the *Poliambulatorio* Lampedusa since the 1990s, when she chose to move permanently into the island and marry a man from Lampedusa.



Figure 6. Migrants burial square on the right side.



Figure 5. Migrants burial square on the left side<sup>59</sup>

‘Here [at the cemetery — on the double square left to the migrants without a name] there were twelve of them. When I had to weld [the coffins], with the electric welding machine, I can’t begin to tell you.... What a stink... then I observed these guys. They were all so young, you know, lying in this position...’ [He stretched one arm to point at an imaginary row of people lying on the floor, lifeless.] ‘I began crying... they came here for a better future... I cried... I could see their faces... One in particular I remember. He was called Ali Mustafà. We put him into a refrigerator... they took five days before the body was identified’ (Fieldnotes 08/05/2016).

Similar accidents have happened decades earlier through the decades, and were reported by journalists, but the situation in Lampedusa never really changed, and Vincenzo kept doing his job as best as he possibly could, writing letters to the police office, the mayor of Lampedusa, and the Prefecture of Agrigento to ask for help. Years went by, and as Don Mimmo had explained to me before entering the cemetery, ‘Here in Lampedusa, up to the present time, we don’t have a proper mortuary. Just a big room, with a plate sheet that should serve to isolate the inside from the outside. This is the situation.’ Before undocumented migration grew into a national and international industry (Andersson 2014), Vincenzo explained that the State was absent in handling such accidents, and fishermen, other locals, and military personnel, had to face tragic events without a proper system for rescuing migrants, identifying their bodies, and transferring them to cemeteries both in Lampedusa and outside the island, when the local cemetery did not have enough space. As a consequence, many migrants who were buried in Lampedusa were crammed together, without a grave, a name, and a way of being individually identified.

‘Among all these people who say, “poor them!”, none of them helped me. The stink was unbearable. At that time there was no [CPSA] centre, or any kind of help, and we [Vincenzo and his son at times] went to take the bodies.’ Vincenzo worked as a cemetery gate-keeper, but following

<sup>59</sup> In September 2016, the wooden crosses pictured on the right lying down on the floor, that Vincenzo built and positioned on each space where he buried dozens of migrants’ bodies, were replaced by colored crosses built by a local carpenter. The white stone block positioned in the front row, would be holding a monument made out of a few parts of a migrants’ boat abandoned at the Lampedusa boat cemetery, a remote area of the island where the boats of migrants crossing the Mediterranean and brought to shore had been abandoned in the years.

1996, when bodies of dead migrants were rescued by fishing vessels, or the Coast Guard, and brought to Lampedusa, he personally moved them from the boats to his three wheels car, with the help of his son, or some police officers. He explained that the responsibility of transferring migrants' bodies from the fishing boats (where they used to be caught in fishing nets), to the cemetery, was not his. But since someone had to do it, he offered to do the job, because nobody else was willing to touch a body in such conditions. 'What really upsets me is that "Nicolina," and these people, they all take medals, but have no idea of what it is to go on the fishing boats to take a dead person, whose head came off as one tried to hold it, and so the arms, and the rest of the body... Risking to take any sort of disease... these [migrants buried on the left square he is pointing at] died here in Lampedusa, right in front of the harbour. It was 1996.'

Vincenzo could not forget the smell of decomposing bodies retrieved by fishermen or the Coast Guard. He used to protect himself from the unbearable smell by inserting some leaves of mint that he put inside his nostrils. 'Such a stink!' he would grumble, thinking back to those moments. The vivid images of dead migrants' bodies lying on the floor, the details of their faces, their names, and the unbearable smell of their bodies, haunted his memories. The experiences of transporting bodies in decomposition from the boat into the cemetery, profoundly impacted on Vincenzo's life, but what most irritated him was the lack of support during the years, and the further political speeches of politicians, naming Lampedusa's tragedies, rescuers, victims, and dead migrants, without considering direct witnesses' experiences of abandonment.

During ceremonies like the 3<sup>rd</sup> October, heroes and victims are solemnly remembered through words of comfort, care, and understanding, but their experiences of struggle, difficulty and necessity often remain silenced. As I walked across Lampedusani's tombs, on the other side of the cemetery, I noticed something written on the white marble. It read:

'1 August 2011

two naval units of the local Coast Guard reach a watercraft, about fifteen meters long, departed from Libya, and they follow its navigation until a mile from Lampedusa. It is there that the engine of the vessel stops working, and the shipwrecked are transferred to the boats. 271 persons, among which 36 are women and 21 children are rescued.

On the deck of the fishing vessel the dead bodies of 25 persons are found dead for asphyxia during the journey.'

Separated by some fresh pink roses, on the bottom of the marble stone, were other words of praise for the prompt intervention of Coast Guard agents who rescued 528 persons in the night of 8 May 2011, and a further mentioning the three bodies of 20 to 25 years old young people who were retrieved

at sea and buried there in Lampedusa. Their bodies were never identified. Looking at the tombs, after eight months spent in Lampedusa, I began to realize that on those tombs written was the story of immigration to Lampedusa. With those events, scraped on marble from exact dates, precise of rescuers and a few words of knowledge about the protagonists of the tombstone, the story of immigrants who died in Lampedusa sadly vanished. Little is known of the difficulties that they have faced before dying. Their tombs are testimonies of migrants' tragic death and rescuers' important mission, which was only partly accomplished. However, the responsibilities upon which migrants' death rest, and the existential dilemmas that rescuers have faced for not being able to save all migrants, remain submerged. As the next section will show, speaking to rescuers themselves can be an opportunity to reconstitute part of the reality that remains submerged in the abyss of the Mediterranean, where the bodies of unknown migrants still lie.

### The backstage

The 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2013 is officially recognized as a Memorial Day. However, the series of causal events determining the tragedy, and the related responsibilities, remain untold, far from the front stage. G. was one of the first rescuers, together with seven other men and women, tourists and shop owners coming from various parts of Italy. They first heard migrants' screams as the sun rose on the 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2013, and promptly intervened trying to rescue as many people as possible. According to G. and all seven rescuers on the boat, the Coast Guard arrived roughly an hour after the emergency call dialled from their (rescuers) boat at 7:20 a.m. The accident took place off the sea known as Tabaccara,<sup>60</sup> less than a mile far from the harbour. The first rescuers, eye witnesses of what had happened, have been excluded from any investigation about the accident, and by attending the memorial ceremony in Lampedusa, still called for justice and truth to finally come to surface.

G. lives in Lampedusa from May to October. She is from Catania, Sicily, and she owns a clothing shop in Lampedusa. I interviewed her after we met by chance during the migrants' protest<sup>61</sup> in May 2016. She told me about her experiences following the shipwreck while sitting on the rocks, facing the spot where the tragedy occurred. 'We gave the first emergency call. And they [Coast Guard] denied it to us.' A report by Askavusa describing the dynamics of the tragedy, shows that two fishing boats were returning to Lampedusa between 2 a.m. and 3 a.m., in the direction of the Tabaccara. The migrants' vessel stopped in the proximities of Lampedusa, offing the engine for about two hours. Six of the witnesses who were under interrogation on 07/10/2013, declared to have seen

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<sup>60</sup> Name of a sea area on the southern coast of Lampedusa, next to the Rabbit island.

<sup>61</sup> The protest lasted for about ten days and was held against the Dublin Treaty, according to which migrants must remain in the first European country where they landed.

two boats, most probably fishing boats, passing by when it was still night. Other witnesses also reported to have recognized the shape and features of an Italian Coast Guard rescue boats. The two boats which would have not intervened were soon dismissed by further interrogation by the Prosecutor's office of Agrigento.

Vittorio Scarpa, a retired General of the Air Force, moved a complaint for clarifying the delayed intervention of the Military rescue boats, but a further trial never took place (Askavusa 2018). Thinking that they would soon be rescued, the 540 persons on the vessel waited for some time, but soon they began embarking water from the deck. One of them set a blanket alight to signal their presence to the near boats. The witnesses reported that they could still see a boat moving around them from the distance, illuminating them with their lights. Some hours later, 'the sea was still full of alive people, while others were already sinking', told me G. She had shouted to the Coast Guard asking to transfer the people they had on board fast, so that they could keep rescuing others.

'The situation' she explained, 'was chaotic. People [other Lampedusani and tourists who realized what happened had also intervened with their boats to help rescuing the migrants at sea] started picking up bodies from the sea, but you know, none of us have never experienced something like that. We were and are still having nightmares about that day at times. We have been abandoned.'

G. had told me about her sleepless nights since the accident, and her and other first rescuers' battles for determining the responsibility for the death of 366 persons. For her, it was about receiving a recognition as a witness of the tragedy and turning her sense of powerlessness into a form of presence towards the victims of the shipwreck. Nevertheless, after three years from the tragedy, she was never called as a witness for a trial investigating the responsibilities of the authority's delayed intervention on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October 2013. A report from journalist Michele Gambini declares that the Italian State should make sure that a serious investigation and reconstruction of the events take place before celebrating memorial events as the one of 3<sup>rd</sup> October. Determining the responsibilities of the fishing boats seen by the migrants, as well as the military ship that shipwreck survivors declared illuminated them while circumnavigating their vessel, is a primary issue for both rescuers like G. and the rescued migrants.

As G., the other seven first rescuers intervening on the 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2013, publicly wrote a letter in which they categorically refused to take part of the ceremonial events in memory of the victims of the 3<sup>rd</sup> October. For years they have tried to be publicly and legally heard on three main issues regarding the accident. Firstly, at 2:30 a.m. and 3.00 a.m., two unidentified boats were spotted by survivors of the shipwreck, who tried to use some torch lights to signal their position. Secondly, the intervention of the Coast Guard happened after more than thirty minutes from the first emergency



call, determining the death of people who were still alive when the first emergency call was dialled. Thirdly, the tragedy of October 2013 determined a state of emergency, and it was precisely on the name of such ‘emergency’ that the EUROSUR funds for dealing with the phenomenon of undocumented migration were justified. European politics showed its presence by budgeting a mission of patrolling and surveillance of the Mediterranean. In the meantime, the Italian government manifested its attention for the victims of the accident by declaring the 3<sup>rd</sup> October as National day in memory of the victims of immigration.

‘A false reality of a pitiable lie’

The ceremony occurring in 2016 in memory of the victims of the 3<sup>rd</sup> October was accompanied by the presence of Minister of Defence Angelino Alfano and forecasted live on TV. The words of mayor Nicolini reported at the very beginning of this chapter represented the core and main scope of the ceremony: to remember the tragedy upon which the state of emergency must be recognized by all EU state members, and to be reminded of the work of military rescuers. H. was one of the survivors from the shipwreck who wrote a letter to his younger brother who died at sea. He read aloud while a young man made the translation into Italian, in front of an audience made up of young students; some bored, others partially interested. In the front row, was the mayor, together with the armed forces. In my field diary, during that night, I sketched the scene very quickly.

H. goes on to express his and the survivors’ disappointment, because nothing has been done to have the bodies of their loved ones and their brothers back home. Also, he claims, the 3<sup>rd</sup> October Committee does not represent them. They work, he says, but this is by no means representative of their work, which for three years they tried to assert, without being listened to. The second to take the stage, one of his companions, asks that the citizens of Lampedusa — the people who have saved them, (rather than the institutions) — to be open to a dialogue with them; to have a relationship with them. “This is necessary”, he says’ (Fieldnotes, 03/10/16).

Only silence followed those words, and the very brief intervention of mayor Nicolini, making empty promises for which no practical actions were taken. No consideration of the inherent socio-cultural, historical and ordinary circumstances determining the current situation on the island. No mentioning of the unanswered questions of G. and other rescuers, the dysfunctional political system on the island, the traumas suffered by victims and daily experienced by the migrants currently held inside the CPSA. Commenting on the ceremony of the 3<sup>rd</sup> October, G. said, ‘Every time I hear about Memorial Day...’ She stopped, as if she had no words to describe what she felt in that moment. Telling her story was

perhaps the most direct and powerful expression of her emotions. ‘With my ex-boyfriend we went to help 48 people, all alone with a boat of twelve meters. This protest, you know, it’s all made up... You must not believe in anything. Cos all you are seeing happening is a false reality of a pitiable lie...’ Grazia added. The atmosphere of humanness which the mayor invoked by letting migrants read letters and standing on stage during the memorial ceremony in 2016, was for G. nothing more than a ‘false reality of a pitiable lie.’ In fact, mayor Nicolini did not mention G. and the rescuers of the 3<sup>rd</sup> October, and did not address survivors’ calls for bringing their loved ones’ bodies back to their countries. The failure in re-establishing individual identities of dead migrants following the shipwreck of the 3<sup>rd</sup> October, and the copious deaths of migrants at sea before and after that tragedy, reveals an inherent ambiguity in the State’s presence-cum-absence towards victims of undocumented migration.<sup>62</sup> Migrants’ story, as Giacomo explained to me, ‘in any case, is never theirs... they don’t speak, and if by any chance they do, what they say is presented for a precise purpose.’ For the founding member of Askavusa Giacomo, such purpose was to constitute an emergency that could be enacted on the stage of Lampedusa to both obtain political and economic support from the EU, enforcing securitarian manoeuvres, while showing the human side of the island, presented by the media as an image of solidarity, humanness, and equality. The survivors of the 3<sup>rd</sup> October who stood on stage and spoke directly to the people of Lampedusa, were stopped by the intervention of the mayor Nicolini who formally acknowledged their request, and moved to the next moment of the show, the march from *Porta d’Europa* to the old harbour. Survivors of the 3<sup>rd</sup> October — and a married Syrian couple who lost contact with their two sons following the shipwreck of 11 October 2013 — pinned their hopes on locals’ sense of humanness. Following the 3<sup>rd</sup> October, all survivors of the shipwreck were detained in Lampedusa for several months. Many locals showed great interest and a sense of hospitality towards them, collaborating with police, lawyers, and international organizations to ensure that they would be supported as they deserved. But locals had battled for migrants’ rights and their own rights for many years, and during the 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2016 commemoration, most of them did not even attend the ceremony. Hopelessness merged with a shared sense of abandonment which, instead of bounding the victims, seemed to divide them.

As the ceremony of the 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2016 revealed, in order to be publicly and politically recognized, an emergency must be presented in the most appropriate form. A stage is needed, where the mayor stands to represent the voices of a whole community, showing both strength and humanness (Cuttitta 2012). The presence of the witnesses of the tragic event is important for the outcome of the spectacle. The Comitato 3 Ottobre, a non-profit organization that was born following the shipwreck

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<sup>62</sup> Identification and re-inscription are strategies of governance which states have used and still deploy to constitute and draw the boundaries across broader national identities [See (Merli and Buck 2015) for an analysis of the politics of forensic identification of Burmese migrants of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami].

of the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October 2013 in order to give resonance to the event across Italy by projects in collaboration with schools and the Italian institutions, co-organized the memorial ceremony in October 2016. The aim of Comitato 3 Ottobre is to work for secure migration with humanitarian channels, and to promote ‘correct information’ on the phenomenon of undocumented migration (Comitato 3 Ottobre 2019). Yet, when some of the survivors from the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October went on stage to express their dissatisfaction for the dead migrants whose bodies had yet not been identified, the mayor intervened, interrupting them. She thanked them and said that they were running out of time.

The stage I observed through my ethnographic notes is one that spectacularizes suffering while pretending to safeguard it. While a survivor of the shipwreck is crying, sitting on the ground, political and institutional figures are solemnly standing in the front row, listening to the words of the African priest, then coming on the stage to say promising words to the citizens and the survivors. The words of the survivors are quickly dismissed by the intervention of the mayor who seems upset about the intervention which somehow spoiled the solemn atmosphere of the ceremony. The spectacle of the border takes place in varied acts, which emerge through different historical moments and specific events (Cuttitta 2012: 14). During the 3<sup>rd</sup> October Memorial Day ceremony in Lampedusa, the spectacle of the tragedy was revealing some of its facets, showing witnesses of shipwrecks to reinforce its validity, but being careful in managing their appearance on stage. Too much time, and too many words, may have spoiled what the mayor had said at the beginning of the ceremony.

This was the account of what De Genova (2004) has named as ‘the spectacle of the border’. The ceremony of the 3<sup>rd</sup> October was effectively a spectacle of the tragedy, an act of the emergency, and a wake-up call for an immediate political and economic intervention, based upon a memory of the dead. The ceremonial aspect of the tragedy constitutes a memory of the history of migration, life and death in Lampedusa, which dismisses the “submerged” stories emerging from the experiences of living witnesses of such tragedies. The threshold between State presence, dysfunctional politics, and individuals’ sense of abandonment is opaque, because it takes place in the space of the “camp”, where the spectacle of the border and the ordinariness of life in borderlands are moments of a shared experience of a limbo space (Andersson 2014), or a life-in-between (Jackson 2008). I will now turn to the extent to which such state of living-in-between can impact on shipwreck survivors’ sense of being in life, and how in life they can experience it.

### Brother, rest in peace

The day after the ceremony took place, I had the opportunity to spend some time with H., a survivor from the 3<sup>rd</sup> October shipwreck and author of the letter to his dead brother, which he publicly read on stage during the commemoration. Y and M, two Eritrean cultural mediators, helped me by translating

his words from Tigrinya into Italian. H. was one of the survivors who decided to leave the Comitato 3 Ottobre in 2014, after realizing that what mattered most to the victims, namely the identification of the dead migrants and a dignified burial, was not a primary concern for the Comitato. Referring to the day of the shipwreck, he said, 'I remember what happened in every detail, but when I think about it, it feels like something very distant from now, as if it were not real, and I sometimes ask myself whether it really happened to me.' He rotated his eyes and looked up to add 'I have them here in front of me, but I can't express what I feel for them, not in words anyway.' The cultural mediators and I remained silent. He also stopped his story. We had nothing to add. In his next sentence H. added: 'I dream often. Oh yes, I dream. And in my dreams, I see all my brothers who did not make it, and I realize I am still alive, and that they should be too.' Coming to such a realization every day was not easy, because they should have been there with him, he said.

After another pause, he looked down, and then up again, to add, 'What most irritates me is knowing that their [dead migrants from the 3<sup>rd</sup> October] death has been used for economic interests.' The migrants' bodies had been displaced on National and International news, objectified, and consumed by a global audience. In the meantime, for the survivors of tragedies that have been turned into horrific spectacles, life carries on, though it is not without its difficulties. As argued by Merli and Buck (2015: 16), 'In the age of the Internet the bodies become agents of spectacle and horror that can continue beyond the "life" of the news story.' H. was not particularly disturbed by death *per se*. The loss of his brother was an event he had to deal with, but he was also disturbed by the ways in which the political institutions and others made use of the migrants' deaths.

'This is the world' H. said, 'a world where politicians, but even religious figures, those who are supposed to listen to you and help the real truth to come out, all agree about hiding of truth.' His was a direct attack on the ceremony that had taken place the day before. After reading his letter on stage, he and the other survivors spoke directly to the locals, asking for support for their battle — the identification of the bodies of their loved ones and their dignified burial. For many of the relatives of the victims of the 3<sup>rd</sup> October, the possibility of victory turned into a sense of failure. Hundreds of corpses were already buried in cemeteries around Sicily, with an identification number on their tombs, at last. Many others were retrieved and buried before being identified. The absence of the Italian State in such circumstances created frustration and further desperation among the families of the dead. Their needs were barely heard by the institutions, and after three years, H. was back in Lampedusa to fight for his own rights and for those of the family members of other victims. As we talked, H. added, 'At that time, I thought, brother, may God be blessed cos' you are not here to see all of this.' Thinking of his dead brother, he then repeated, 'Brother, I am here to absorb all of this, you can rest in peace,

together with our brothers.’ From his words, it seemed that death could be a consolation for his brother, a way of protecting him from reality.

The world described by H. is one of disillusion. It translates the realm of uncertainty in which many migrants are caught — the use and consumption of tragedies by political and religious institutions, and the impact this can have on people’s existence. Considering H.’s emotional state, his lucidity in analysing his own life situation was admirable. The term ‘situation’ in existential anthropology can refer to a juncture where people find themselves at the limits of what they can endure, choose, or accept (Jackson 2008). H. could remember what happened on the 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2013 in every detail, but he perceived it as if it had never happened, because accepting the deaths of so many innocent people was ‘hard.’ Believing that death could provide a more peaceful condition for his brother than the one he was experiencing was his sole consolation. H.’s story moves around a subtle threshold between his life, in which he is doomed to bear the burden of being a ‘subject of subjugation’<sup>63</sup> (to use a definition by Das 2007), and his brother’s death, in one sense considered a blessing as he does not know the reality of ‘the world we live in.’

As H. argues, such an in-between condition is strictly dependent on the way political and religious figures failed to support them, promising to ensure them the rights that were negated to them during their journey to Europe. In her analysis of the downfalls of the neoliberal state, Povinelli (2011: 181) argues that the weak neoliberal state of the present time does not ‘produce and distribute life, its qualities, vitalities, and borders, evenly or equitably’, because ‘all goods are generated in a system of distributed misery... so hard to fathom, so impractical, and yet so close to late liberal reality.’ Povinelli’s analysis helps to elucidate the political and economic contexts in which H. lives. He is an Eritrean man who was not granted free movement across the world, an undocumented migrant with just enough money to pay the smugglers for his and his brothers’ journey, and a survivor from a globally recognized shipwreck who was granted permission to live in Germany as a consequence of the tragedy.

Many of the migrants I met in Lampedusa had a High School education, some had studied at University level, and others had had to stop studying in order to work and support their families. Others had never been able to study, ‘because some families are very poor, and no one can go to school. Sometimes, even accessing food is a problem, eating can be a problem at times.’ Jidi, eighteen years old, from Gambia, was one of the thousands of migrants who had had to work hard in neighbouring countries, and then in Libya, to find their way out of Africa. Having survived the many

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63 Das (2007: 59) refers to the victims of violence (analyzing the ‘violations inscribed on the female body (both literally and figuratively) and the discursive formations around these violations’, as ‘subjects of subjection’. Yet, she argues, although ‘the experience of becoming a subject is linked to the experience of subjection in important ways’, the formation of a subject position is ‘not completely determined’ by the experiences of violence. (Ibid. 59) ‘Women, Das (2007: 59) argues, ‘spoke of their experiences’, and by doing so, they regained an apparently silenced or lost sense of identity and subjectivity.

obstacles of undocumented migration and having crossed the Mediterranean, survivors like Sidi and H. had to face the realities of being a migrant in Europe, feeling a sense of despair in their situation, caught between a life of subjugation and the imagined peace that less fortunate companions had met in death.

In this analysis, the work of Giorgio Agamben (2003) can help illuminate some of the ethnographic material. A life that is lived in search of recognition and struggling for its existence is, for Agamben, a 'bare life,' entrapped within a biopolitical force, which, on the one hand regulates it, and on the other hand, abandons it. Living through such a sense of abandonment can lead to the point of considering death a peaceful consolation in a life where one's most fundamental rights are not recognized. "Bare lives" are lives 'abandoned, in the absence of legal protection and political recognition, to the whims of sovereign power' (Lucht 2011: 181). The condition of their existence rests upon the suspension of the law, the establishment of the state of exception, or emergency, which Agamben (2003) explores as a grey zone, an ambiguous land, that is independent of the crimes committed, but contains a fundamental premise: within it, anything could happen. The Mediterranean Sea has become in some respects, and for some targeted groups of people, a grey area where undocumented migrants die regularly, without political recognition, or are rescued to become detainees, under a law which was made to regulate their life or leave them to die (Heller, C., and Pezzani, L., 2012).<sup>64</sup> Within such spaces, 'political rule operates outside the law, while the law has been made to abandon certain human beings deemed exterior, though these exterior beings remain in relation to sovereign power' (Lucht, 2011: 180). The grey area described by Agamben has no space or definite geographical connotation, but it is rather a condition of in-betweenness, a limbo state which does not end when the Mediterranean Sea is crossed, and the rescue operations are concluded. Three years after the shipwreck of the 3<sup>rd</sup> October, H. had not received the support promised by the Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta immediately following the tragedy to identify and ensure a dignified burial for the victims. In December 2013, the BBC reported the difficulties experienced by the relatives of the victims in gaining access to DNA tests, which is not a straightforward test, and getting permission to visit their loved ones, with the following lines,

'Relatives of those who died in one of the worst boat disasters off the shores of Europe in living memory are still waiting to be allowed to take their family members for a proper burial.' (Price 2013)

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<sup>64</sup> The Left-to-die-boat case is a forensic project that refers to a migrant vessel that left the port of Tripoli on 27th March 2011, with seventy-two migrants on board, drifting until 10th April, when it arrived southeast of Tripoli in Zitan. Despite being approached by two helicopters and a military ship during the previous days, no rescue intervention took place. Only eleven migrants were still alive when the vessel arrived in Zitan. Two of them died shortly thereafter (<https://www.forensic-architecture.org/case/left-die-boat/>).

As the years passed, the waiting turned into a profound sense of abandonment. In response to H.'s reflection on death, I asked him if death was really a consolation in this kind of life. It was a delicate question, and yet by engaging with him I had the feeling that if he let it out, he would feel better. Was I making a mistake? I would ask the question, and let him speak if he wished to.

H. responded: 'Somehow it is. I mean, I live with suffering.' Then, he continued with his story, explaining that when he and his brother decided to leave home, they knew it was dangerous. H. and his parents did not agree that his brother should come, but his brother had asked why not. Instead of going by himself, they would go together. He explained that he did not fear the journey, and that being together would be better, but H. was worried, and felt a great responsibility towards his younger brother. Migrants who take the risk and leave their countries, who risk losing their lives in the desert and in the Mediterranean Sea, 'direct their attention to strategies for recovering their lives and livelihoods from a depressing future' (Lucht 2011: xi). Wars, famines, dictatorships, and the overall desire to 'move upward socially and economically' (Ibid., 84), push many Africans to become undocumented migrants and embark on dangerous journey to Europe.

The decision to leave is nevertheless a very important one for the whole family. H. focused on a detail he could not forget from the day of the shipwreck. 'Before the accident, we were together. My brother asked me something. I felt a strange feeling, as if something bad was going to happen. He moved away to sit apart and asked me to leave him alone, that I should not talk to him. I asked him why, but he never answered. After a while, the accident happened.'<sup>65</sup> Tears rolled down H.'s face as he explained that it was his last interaction with his brother. For H., the non-resolution of what his brother had tried to tell him before he died, and his inability to understand him, and do something, holding onto his sense that 'something bad was going to happen', caused him enormous pain. H. had manifested his abhorrence of the people who had promised to help and yet left him alone, but ultimately, his was the story of a brother who felt unable to protect his younger brother.

From H.'s words, it appears that despite the recognition of political and religious responsibilities, and the use and consumption of innocent people's lives and their stories for profitable purposes, the experience of losing a loved one in the context of undocumented migrant sea crossings is ultimately seen as a personal failure. H. left home to be united with his relatives in Germany and to work with them. For him, the journey was a risk worth taking, but he struggled to endure the loss of his brother. His was an attempt to secure a better life for himself and his brother, as he thought it would be better for both of them. The present existence of H. was one of suffering, and it was difficult for him to accept the reality of the situation. However, after waking from his dreams he realized that

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<sup>65</sup> A shipwreck survivor was interviewed by a YouTube channel "Libera Espressione" and declared that 'From a distance we saw [two boats] moving from right to left [the migrants' boat had its engine off in proximity of the southern coast of Lampedusa, and the two boats came from the sea (from the south)], so we set fire to a blanket to attract their attention, but no one came.' (Askavusa 2018).

it was real, that the situation was hopeless because his brother and all those who died that day, should have been there with him.

### Living without being

In a passage from the letter to his dead brother, H. referred to his life as ‘living without being’. He explained that he was simply trying to express how he felt. It meant being aware that the lives and deaths of migrants have become subjects/objects of the ‘border spectacle’ (De Genova 2004). In other words, it meant being subjected to a state power that ‘withdraws legal protection and political recognition only to assert itself even more forcefully’ (Lucht 2011: 156). After the shipwreck, H.’s struggle for a life worth living turned into a condition of living without being recognized, being heard, and being with his brother. H.’s struggle through the years after the shipwreck, the interviews given to journalists from all over the world, his first-year of battling with the ‘Comitato 3 Ottobre,’ and his testimony during the ceremony the day before our conversation, were ways of being present in a condition that he experienced as absence. Going on stage to read his letter, asking the locals for help and speaking to me were attempts to give purpose to his existence, and to find a purpose in his brother’s death. If action equals being, ‘ceasing to act is to cease to be’ (Sartre 2005:498). But action is always contingent, and as Lucht argues in dialogue with Jackson’s work, if we consider the question of being as

‘a dynamic relationship between circumstances over which we have little control... and our capacity to live those circumstances in a variety of ways’ (Jackson 2005: xi), migrants come up against situations that at times find no resolution (see also Schutz & Luckmann 1973:3)’ (Lucht 2011: 15).

H.’s words suggest that there is a thin line between living and being. Living by knowing that the death of a loved one becomes embedded in the business of ‘illegality’ (Andersson 2014) and profit growing around undocumented migration, and feeling somehow personally responsible for it, as H. felt to some extent, is to live in a condition of absence. This state of non-being is enforced by the fact that even the rights of the dead brother (a dignified burial and a complete public description of the events) are not recognized. Living without being is to acknowledge the mechanism upon which the neoliberal state explored by Povinelli (2011) is one which rest upon a distributed space of abandonment, which grows by its relation of use and regulation towards people’s life and death (Agamben 2003).

Despite the institutional faults, H. felt that he had not taken care of his brother. He felt responsible for his brother’s death, for not understanding what his last strange behaviour meant, and for being alive, while he could only dream that his brother was next to him. For Povinelli, (2011: 179)



care depends on ‘where we believe failure resides or what we believe failure consists of.’ To speak about care, we must delimit a level of failure, a threshold between taking care, and not taking care. For H., the most painful consideration was not about the lack of care shown by the political and religious figures, namely their failure to let migrants move freely and safely across the world. Political failure rested in the death of thousands of migrants crossing the Mediterranean, but the business coming out of it, was an unbearable fact: it went beyond the issue of death per se. On top of the political failure, H. spoke of a personal failure, which ultimately corroborated his existence. As the elder brother, and the first to leave Eritrea and his family, H. felt responsible for his own life and for his brother’s. His coping mechanism, his mere resolution to a state of being that he could not resolve, was to think that in death, his brother would find peace. H. had to find alternative ways of coping with his sense of powerlessness. Death was paradoxically the sole consolation for being unable to fulfil his brother’s desires and ensure his right to a dignified burial. H. named the condition in which he lived as a result of such context. His was a life where the living wrestled with being.

‘The world we live in,’ an expression which H. used during our conversation, incorporated a multitude of experiences, narratives, critical events, and lived spaces which, all together, determined the condition of being an undocumented migrant at the present time. In describing his dreams about his brother and the other victims of the 3<sup>rd</sup> October shipwreck being alive, in his struggle to find the words to describe what he had gone through, and in his sense of distance and great proximity to the accident, H. appeared as the “bare life” *par excellence*. He was a man who recognized the political manoeuvres that used his stories and emotional state of being for humanitarian discourses, at the expense of his and hundreds of thousand other migrants’ needs, rights, and requests. Nevertheless, paying particular attention to the power of life stories as migrants like H. express them, helps highlighting that being a subject of subjugation (Das 2007: 59) or a “bare life” does not exclude being alive, having a spectrum of action, response, and recognition of one’s condition and possibilities. In stating his presence, ‘Brother, I am here to absorb all of this,’ H. was both determining his and his brother’s existential death, but also, he was expressing their inseparable bond in life. The abject space defines the ‘camp’ as Agamben understands it. But ‘abject’ for Kristeva (1982) is the very condition of being alive; it is the primary event of being born, which marks the separation between the subject and the (m)other. If on the one hand state presence-cum-absence can produce a sense of loss, abandonment and separation from what migrants like H. perceive as being intimately part of their own lifeworld (a brother’s life and right to be buried in peace), on the other hand, such demarcation produces sparks of vitality, or sparks of life. As Jackson (2005: xiv) nicely puts it, ‘though human existence is relational, a mode of being-in-the-world . . . we are involved in a constant struggle to

sustain and augment our being in relation to the being of others, as well as the nonbeing of the physical and material world, and the ultimate extinction of being that is death’.

In this chapter, I have already shown in what sense Lampedusa can be defined through Agamben’s notion of the “camp,” an indeterminate space where the presence of the State is experienced as a social and political distance by locals and migrants. But most importantly, I aimed to define how those living in such spaces respond to the unfolding of critical events, how they perceive their ambiguities, how they struggle, suffer, and attempt to overcome them. Life in borderland spaces is varied. It depends on contingencies, situations, possibilities and perspectives, which form and transform the locals’ and migrants’ *lifeworlds*, their struggle and their possibilities to wrestle with everyday problems. For some, the absence of the State can create frustration, for others it can generate doubt, and for many more, it can more profoundly impact on their sense of being in the world.

These are fragmentary aspects of what we may refer to as submerged reality, often sinking in the waters of political interests, public ceremonies, and apparent presence towards the needs of the inhabitants, migrants, and victims of suffering at sea. This last conversation with H., which took place the day after the 3<sup>rd</sup> October commemoration, ultimately shows that abandonment unites inhabitants, survivors of shipwrecks, current migrants, and those who died at sea, within the “camp of Lampedusa.” Abandonment holds them within the bubble of appearance; a bubble of knowledge, floating in the ocean of submerged realities. The bodies of those who came to know the Mediterranean as a parent of hope and a judge of death were literally submerged. Many have disappeared below the waves of the Mediterranean, too many for their memory to be fully recognized. Abandonment can be expressed in a glance, is often heard in silence by those who are set aside, made invisible, because it is already evident to those who bear it as a burden, day after day, like H., G., or Vincenzo. Abandonment of others (be it a Lampedusa resident, an undocumented migrant, a cemetery gatekeeper, a civilian, a drowning migrant or one fighting for the dignified recognition of his dead brothers and sisters); of those who were less fortunate, because they have been left to their suffering, despite being publicly represented as victims to be heard. These people were the living memories of a tragedy, which, according to the mayor of Lampedusa, should never be forgotten by the world. Yet, as she spoke, they had already been forgotten, by her and by the institutions, while humanitarian and securitarian discourses were performed on stage.

## Conclusion

This chapter introduced Lampedusa as a frontier for undocumented migration, where memorial ceremonies conducted in the name of equality, humanness, and emergency fail to answer important questions regarding the responsibilities for migrant deaths in the Mediterranean and the survivors' requests for a dignified burial. The stage, where public ceremonies (such as the one that took place on the 3<sup>rd</sup> October) are presented to an audience, does not reveal the ordinary needs of locals and migrants. This representation of Lampedusa seems overly reductive when compared to the stories of the struggle for medical treatments, a decent water supply, and other forms of neglect exercised by the State towards the Lampedusa residents. It appears contradictory when the mayor states that migrants, dead or alive, should have the same rights to dream, hope, and have a future, while hundreds of people are detained inside the Hotspot. These migrants are held in a state of normalized exception, under surveillance by military personnel, and in a state of general indifference towards their daily life, questions, and doubts.

As a local warned me when I first came to the island, the houses on the front line, 'looking so clean and tidy, nice and lovely, hide a whole world.' As this chapter has shown, the spectacle of the emergency enacted on the 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2016 is the broken mirror of what emerges experientially on and off stage. Its existence generates frustration and disillusionment in locals and migrants. The ethnographic sections selected for this chapter introduce Lampedusa as the ideal stage where "the camp" appears as a transformative and ambiguous space in which "being left to die" and "being celebrated" globally are mutual aspects of the spectacle of emergency, which in experience emerges as an indeterminate space of abandonment of everyday life.

Memorial events, like the 3<sup>rd</sup> October, do not address State responsibilities either with regard to intervening to save the lives of migrants at sea, or to ensuring their identification and a dignified burial. As Merli and Buck (2015) argue, the identification of bodies after mass death is the ultimate possibility of finding recognition after life. The limited care used by the Italian State in identifying the bodies of the 366 migrants who died on the 3<sup>rd</sup> October, was peculiar to a shipwreck whose subjects were undocumented migrants. The state of being undocumented and the illegality of their journey, were the reasons why identification became problematic, and the promise of the Italian State to celebrate National Funerals was only partially fulfilled.<sup>66</sup>

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66 Monday 21st October 2013, the memorial ceremony for the dead migrants of the 3<sup>rd</sup> October and the 11th December 2011 took place in Agrigento. Mayor Nicolini expressed her disagreement in choosing Agrigento as the place where the ceremony took place, because the funerals should have been celebrated in Lampedusa, where the shipwreck took place (Stomi, J., 2013)

This chapter has illustrated how the apparent presence of the State on the frontier of Lampedusa, for the people who inhabit the island or for those who have crossed the frontier, whether dead or alive, becomes an ambiguously violent form of abandonment. This kind of violence is difficult to discern because it occurs under the illusion of care. The stage where memorial events are enacted reveals its double face, on the one side it is publicly represented as caring, while on the other it is neglectful, determining expectations that are never met. This institutional failure in fulfilling promises becomes the condition for the locals' and the migrants' existence, and has an impact on their sense of "being in the world", which is often expressed as an intimate struggle for recognition. In different forms, and for different reasons, the people I have introduced in this chapter have experienced the possibility of being left to die by the State. The locals and migrants appear ethnographically as different kinds of *homini sacri* who share their lives within the space of the camp, deprived of different degrees of freedom and rights, in a shared world of misery, as Povinelli (2011) argues, unequally distributed by a State which claims to do the opposite.

In light of this, it is worth dwelling on what the *homo sacer* is *in presentia*, rather than on what constitutes the status of "being left to die." In borderland situations, the relationship between State presence and locals' and migrants' sense of being abandoned, is the founding principle for the constitution of what Agamben calls "*homo sacer*", or "bare life." Ethnographically, Agamben's paradigm is confirmed, but it is also pushed forward. The locals and migrants reveal their vulnerabilities and state of subjugation to State power, but at the same time, by telling their stories, moving their critiques, confessing their fears, disillusion, and hopes, they manifest their vitality. The "camp" is a space where people's lives and deaths are subjected to what Agamben (2003) refers to as "states of exception." However, life carries on and finds its way through everyday difficulties. The next chapter concentrates on the intimate and ethically challenging conditions of struggle in which migrants and migration workers on the island live, in the face of reductive representations of life in the borderlands.

## Chapter III The spectacle of the border and its backstage

It is night-time in Lampedusa when the Coast Guard boat approaches land, and the dazed faces of the migrants appear more distinctly from the darkness. As the boat moves closer to the pier, the beams from the spotlights on land illuminate them. ‘They have been at sea for two days’ the Coast Guard Captain tells me.

The first migrants to touch land almost fall to the ground. They are weak after so many hours at sea. Nicola and Roberto, two of the *operatori* (workers) from the Misericordia di Capo Rizzuto Lampedusa take them to the CPSA bus. As they land, the migrants, mostly male, are pushed quite roughly towards the medical check-up area. Their feet are mostly swollen. Some are wearing t-shirts, while others are naked from the waist up. As they walk through the narrow corridor left for them on the pier, past the ambulance and towards the CPSA bus, the migrants show bold bodies; some are statuesque, others very thin. Most of them have worked in conditions of exploitation in Libya for weeks, months, or years, as they will tell me in the following days. Talking to them on landing is almost impossible (Gatta 2006-2007), and even if it were possible, I had decided not to overwhelm them with any questions. During the past few years, many migrants have perished in what they call ‘compounds’, large prison-like paces in Libya, where African migrants are often forced to live in unhygienic conditions with very little food, dirty water and violent treatment (UNHCR 2017). For Agier (2011), they are the remnants of our world, those who have been refused the right to move freely and safely, the right to protection from torture, multiple rape, and conditions that they themselves define as ‘slavery.’ In the digital world, migrants appear as vulnerable bodies, drowning in the deep waters of the Mediterranean Sea (Andersson 2014). They are publicly presented as ‘bare lives’ (Agamben 2003), those who could have died but were rescued from near death. Either alive or dead, theirs is a condition of vulnerability and otherness, opposed to an imagined “Us” that is visually represented by the Coast Guard rescue agents at sea, and the many migration workers on land (Andersson 2014). As migrants reach land, the different roles are established and the separation between workers and migrants is defined.

Such images, some anthropologists have argued, serve to reinforce the illegality of the migrants upon which the system of undocumented migration rests (De Genova 2004), as well as making the State’s presence visible and the European Union’s management of migrant flows in the Mediterranean (Gatta 2012). Often, however, (arguably on purpose) they fail to unravel the *lifeworlds* and life experiences of the people who are involved (Jackson 2008; Lucht 2011; Andersson 2014). If borderlands have been explored, on the one hand, as the ideal sites for determining categories (such as “illegals”, “contagious”, “victims” and “saviours”) within the economy of what

has been named as the ‘border spectacle’ (De Genova 2004), borderlands are also spaces ‘of intransitive, unstable, and intersubjective meanings. As frontiers, these spaces call into question the kind of reductive and essentializing language that makes human *experience* appear to be coterminous’ with these conventional categories, often aimed at identifying multiple subjects in borderlands (Jackson 2008: 378). Although inscribed in rehearsed political and media discourses, the frontier ultimately ‘throws up images of borderline experiences, of a destabilized and transgressive consciousness... where migrants find themselves at the limits of what they can endure, border patrol agents are stretched beyond the limits of what they can control, and intellectuals find that orthodox ways of describing and analysing the world do not do justice to the experiences involved’ (Jackson 2008: 377-378).

Although the landing is a determinant moment of encounter (the first in fact) between the migrants and the European border — thus between the migrants and migration workers — in this chapter I initially state that the mediation of images and videos of the frontier of Lampedusa establish an image of ‘bare life.’ In other words, the digitalization of migrants and migration workers’ experiences on landing often gives a minimal narrative, the seeds of a story, which leads to a stereotypical and impoverished image of two roles/characters — victim/rescuers — and nothing more. Secondly, I consider the ways in which the sole description of the landing space fails to capture a sense of life in borderlands. In order to engage with migrants and migration workers’ lives on the island — which is to exceed the roles, labels, and characteristics attributed to them by a long-debated discourse on the phenomenon of undocumented migration — it is necessary to observe them and listen to them at other moments, and in other spaces. I argue that only when migrants and migration workers are considered in contexts other than the spectacular moment of landing — in which they can express themselves in less structured and pre-ordered spaces (in their ordinary life on the island) — can one truly engage with their lives by looking beyond the roles, labels, and categories attributed to them by the media and political discourse on the phenomenon of undocumented migration.

After giving an account of the procedures that make landing a spectacular experience, the second part of the chapter will cover stories of how the migrants are subjugated and abused by criminals, and of their capacity to hope for a better future. I show how they define their experiences of violence in Libya and their status as detainees awaiting departure after reaching Lampedusa. I will show that hope and hopelessness are aspects of the melancholic state of waiting experienced by many of the migrants who are detained in Lampedusa for long periods. Based on how each individual negotiates such feelings, by agency or patience, life in borderlands tends to add an uncertain and often unpredictable sense of life, which reproduces but also exceeds the limiting and overall passivity connected to the figure of the ‘*homo sacer*.’

If the images broadcast by the media often reduce the migrants' experiences to fixed labels and static ideas of who they are, what they feel, and how they live, the same can be said for the migration workers. On the digital screen, they appear as the heroic rescuers. Yet, as I spoke to them, and spent some time with them on the island, they began describing Lampedusa as a surreal space, where one's sense of personal and ethical balance is often questioned. The ordinary experiences of the doctors and cultural mediators regarding the phenomenon of undocumented migration reveal a shared difficulty in finding a reasonable explanation for what the migrants have suffered, suffer and will suffer after they leave the island. As Andersson (2012: 274) states, and this chapter reveals, 'the workings of the illegality industry... are absurd.' They are not simply absurd in their often-contradictory mechanisms, which frequently give life to the system of undocumented migration rather than working against it, as is intended. Absurdity has to do with the grotesque ethical dilemmas faced by the migration workers, and with the dramatic interplay between agency and patience. Taking inspiration from existential anthropology, the border spectacle thus appears as an existential situation, of being 'betwixt and between, of struggle and suffering' (Jackson 2008: 377). These limit-situations exceed what the border spectacle ought to represent (Andersson 2014). However, ethnographically, they emerge vehemently from extraordinary stories of ordinary people, whose voices merge with one another to reshuffle the roles that they have been attributed by the industry of undocumented migration, to reveal something more about their human existence.

## Victim/rescuers, and nothing more

The following section will describe what one could observe during an ordinary landing on the island of Lampedusa. It will first highlight the procedures through which migrants are disembarked and transferred to the CPSA. The space of the migrant landing is structured to appear as a spectacular imagery of bareness (Agamben 1995) rendered by exhausted, wounded and cold migrants, and as a scene of border regime control and humanitarianism (Andersson 2012). This section will highlight some of the procedures which contribute to such imageries from the standpoint of an observer watching from the pier.

On 21 October 2016, I was at the Favaloro pier.<sup>67</sup> A migrant landing was expected at 22: 30, but it took place at 23: 05. Delays were very common and depended on several factors.<sup>68</sup> I went to the pier with Anna<sup>69</sup> and two photographers and waited for a few minutes. The Misericordia di Capo

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67 When the wind pulled hard from South, migrant landings took place at the old Port, but most of the times, migrants were transferred to the Favaloro pier, beside the Guitgia beach. From the Guitgia beach, one of the most popular beaches in Lampedusa, one could only see the Coast Guard boats approaching the pier to then disappear behind the rocks, but nothing more.

68 Strong wind hindering the transshipment operations and technical procedures which took more time than expected on board, for example.

69 Anna is a gynecologist working for Medical Clinic di Lampedusa and responsible for medical checks happening during migrant landings, with the supervision of Doctor Bartolo.

Rizzuto bus from the CPSA arrived. Rami<sup>70</sup> came in, followed by some volunteers and workers from Mediterranean Hope. It started drizzling. Ten minutes later, about a dozen Carabinieri entered from the gate. The Red Cross personnel entered the pier, followed by Save the Children, and IOM. The UNHCR team was already there. Vincent, an Eritrean cultural mediator, and Benjamin, the Austrian inspector from EASO, reached their colleagues. The Coast Guard Captain and first coordinator of the landings came in. The landing operations could now begin.

I moved close to Frontex personnel who were standing on the top level of the pier,<sup>71</sup> just in front of the spot where the Coast Guard boat landed, loaded with migrants. Next to them were EASO, Save the Children, UNHCR, and OIM personnel. These were scattered in mixed order, usually all standing, sometimes sitting on the elevated level of the pier. The lower part of the pier was primarily occupied by doctors, the first to approach migrants on land. Doctor Bartolo was the medical doctor responsible for first visits to migrants who land in Lampedusa, and he was almost always present at the pier, helped by volunteers from Red Cross, Misericordie Lampedusa and Misericordia di Capo Rizzuto. These were joined by Red Cross personnel.

Next to them, agents from the Forensic department, Carabinieri, and Coast Guard personnel observed the procedures. The ambulance was usually parked to leave a narrow walking distance for migrants, who had to walk on an unpaved road, at times without wearing shoes or socks. Mediterranean Hope members had worked hard to be granted a permit to use a rubber carpet to facilitate migrants' walk to the bus and avoid that they would further get hurt to their feet. After two years, towards the end of 2016, they obtained it, but the carpet was rarely used, because military agents and other personnel complained that it slowed down their work. Behind the ambulance, normally stood members of Mediterranean Hope and its volunteers. They usually came at the landing with a thermos filled with hot tea, or fresh water and fruit juice, depending on the time of the year, and dozens of snack boxes for the migrants. The bus of the CPSA was instead at the entrance of the pier, positioned next to the gates, and guarded by the Carabinieri for most of the landings.

From the distance, migration workers appeared as myriad of colourful dots on the pier, some moving, others standing still, waiting for the approaching load of migrants. Migration workers wore colourful jackets with flashy names on them, to distinguish them.<sup>72</sup> Migrants wore casual clothes, t-shirts, jeans, tracksuits, long coloured dresses. They were mostly wet, and many of them only wore socks. Rescuers on the boat were in biohazard suit. Migrants have been saved and led to land by Coast Guard Agents. The latter were dressed in white uniforms, posing on top of the boat, making gestures

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70 Tunisian cultural mediator in his twenties, and ex migrant who landed in Lampedusa illegally many years ago. He worked for EASO.

71 The pier was divided in a corridor about one hundred meters long, where migrants stood, together with medical personnel, cultural mediators, and military personnel.

72 The light blue signals the Misericordie Lampedusa members, then the bright red of the Red Cross, the dark blue of EASO, and the lighter blue of Frontex. Then there is the dark blue of UNICEF, the red of Save, the very dark blue of armed Carabinieri. Then there is the Coast Guard with the phosphorescent orange suits, and the doctors from the Polyclinic, with Doctor Bartolo on the front line.



to calm down migrants, to inform them of what will happen next, and to assure them. In contrast to the definite identities and roles marked by uniforms, colours, and positions occupied at the pier, migrants appear as a huddled mass of people in distress, sitting or standing in an overcrowded boat, crammed together without an exact space or order. Migrants, reversely, appeared as confused, frightened, relieved, and impatient to touch land.

The order and control manifested by the agents on board clashed with the uncertainty, doubt, and cramped conditions of the migrants. Their wet t-shirts and wide-open eyes, whitened hair, and exhaustion from the journey, one may argue, marked the migrants as suffering others, in need for cures, help, and direction (Gatta 2006-2007). The particular positions, clothing, and physical state of migrants and migration workers reinforce migrants' image of diseased and contagious. Military personnel serve to witness them as thieves and potentially dangerous, and Frontex agents symbolize the European eye, alert, vigilant, and ready to protect Lampedusa: Door to Europe.

## Handling the migrants

When migrants touch land, they go through very fast scabies checks. These take place within a few seconds, because 'everything must be very fast during the landing,' said Samara, the gynaecologist working for UNICEF. When doctors recognize scabies, migrants are asked to wait on the right side of the pier, while the others proceed on the left, accompanied by Misericordie Lampedusa volunteers, doctors, or cultural mediators, moving restlessly.

'A young man just touching land seems not to understand what happens when Anna asks him to pull his shirt up. He looks at her with an interrogative look. She repeats the gesture, asking to pull his shirt up two or three times. Then he does it. She looks at him, and he looks at his stomach with an estranged look, as if he could also help her in her search. With an expression of doubt in his face, and his head all bleached from the sea salt. He looks at her and smiles. She sends him aside, along with the people with scabies. For a moment he seems to be asking "but how?" as a protest, but then he turns, and accompanied by one member of the Misericordie Lampedusa goes to the right side to wait' (Fieldnotes, 21/10/2016).

For the first time at the pier, migrants undertake a selective process. This is founded upon medical checks, which will determine whether a migrant is "good", or "ok", to be allowed inside the bus and be welcomed to the CPSA, or whether it is a "no", and still need some time before being ready to become a "guest" of the Hotspot. As Ravenda (2012) observed in his work on *Centri di Seconda Accoglienza* (Secondary Welcoming Stay Centres) in Puglia (Italy), migrants are to every extent "detainee" within a system which regulates their lives and treats them as prisoners, while waiting for

the timely procedures of getting their documents. In the meantime, frustration can take multiple forms, and self-harm becomes an extreme request for being acknowledged by the institutions, through actions aimed at proving one's existence, and in the worse scenarios causing one's death. But before becoming *guests*, migrants must be considered suitable. Medical checks take place three times from the rescue operations at sea, to the arrival to the CPSA in Lampedusa. 'The first takes place on rescue boats, the second during the landing operations, and ultimately when migrants enter the CPSA. Curiously enough, the medical attention manifested by the system of undocumented migration during landings, clashes with the conditions in which migrants will be staying inside the Hotspot. As Jacopo, one of the doctors of Misericordia di Capo Rizzuto explained, 'The migrants with scabies are transferred to the second floor, a room where they are kept separately from others to avoid contamination. There is one bathroom for say thirty people at least, but it's broken. Only the shower works. I once went to check the situation, and shit was coming down the roof.'

'What do you mean?' I asked.

'From the tubes on the roof. I made a complaint, but you know, the situation never changes.'

What appeared as a functional system deployed to guarantee migrants' health, clashed with the insufficient hygienic and sanitary conditions which migrants would have faced at the CPSA. Jacopo's words reinforced the fact that during migrant landing, people followed procedures which had to be maintained in order to show the efficiency of the whole system. Migrants' medical check was part of scrutinizing their physical wellbeing. As Gatta (2012) observes in his work on Lampedusa's landings in 2006-2007, medical procedures are aimed at reinforcing the image of the sick and potentially contagious migrant, rather than effectively solving their condition or alleviating their suffering.

For De Genova (2013:1), if on the one hand 'border policing and immigration law enforcement produce a spectacle that enacts a scene of "exclusion,"' on the other hand, it 'supplies the rationale for essentializing citizenship inequalities as categorical differences that then may be racialized.' In other words, the procedures of identification, inclusion and exclusion of migrants during landing, are functional to reinforce the public opinion of a diligent and lawful State which safeguards its citizens by preventing contamination, regulating the entrance of the migrants, and identifying them one by one. But it mostly serves to produce an expectation of the migrant as a ghostly figure or victim of unimaginable violence, and potentially sick or dangerous to others, carrying diseases like scabies, publicly considered as alien to the Western wealthy world.

What Gatta (2006-2007) describes as a set of procedures aimed at determining the potentially contagious otherness of the illegal migrant, which needs to be carefully monitored by the State and the institutions, has been critically observed as a 'spectacle' where everything is performed accordingly (De Genova 2004). Interestingly enough, migration workers themselves speak of the

landing as a ‘spectacle’, where some people come to watch and believe to have learnt what undocumented migration is about. The following ethnographic extract will describe how.

### Lights on: the impoverished image of the ‘*homo sacer*’

As the first migrants’ boats approaches the pier, from the dark, two agents on land turn on the light cannon, and as Manuel whispers to my ear, ‘the spectacle begins.’ As migrants land, agents stand with their cameras between the first and second canopy, to take pictures with powerful flashes which illuminate men and women’s faces, as they land. Some use smartphones, others use video-cameras. They are there to capture migrants’ features and their moves. Women slowly come down to land, helped by some volunteers, ordered by Bartolo and his team. The migrants are escorted away by members of Misericordie Lampedusa or the Red Cross. Cameras control, resume, film and photograph what will be circulated to the digital world as the reality of undocumented migration in Lampedusa. Such a conglomerate of images and videos is the product of a nearly maniacal attachment to the camera which I observe in Frontex agents, Coast Guard personnel, and Forensic department. Mayor Nicolini is present at the landing, as it often happens when politicians, religious figures, and institutional visits of special *guests*. On this occasion, two friars from Palermo (Sicily) and three young women doing an internship in journalism are present at the landing, and mayor Nicolini has accompanied them to the Favaloro pier. The mayor holds her phone to take a picture of some Sub-Saharan migrants watching them on land from the Coast Guard boat.

During the landing, flash emerges as an extrinsic characteristic of the production of otherness. It is through the camera, which is external to the life experiences of the migrants, that reality is captured into an image. Everything must be filmed and photographed in order for the global audience to consume images of the industry of clandestine migration (Andersson 2014). As Foucault (1965) argued, the public representation of the other is functional to the common reinforcement of a social political thought that is based on the principle of separation. Public images of rescue operations and the transshipment of illegal migrants among the waters of the Mediterranean and the Italian coasts, such as the Greek and the Spanish ones, have become the reason for an ever-increasing normalization of that performative act of elusive inclusion that in fact determined bare life and fixed images of rescuers and heroes (Andersson 2012). It is in the spotlight that everything happens. Under the bright lights, pointed by a machine with wheels which is used mostly during the landings where the mayor, journalists, or politicians are present, the parade of bare lives takes place.

Manuel then adds, ‘look at those tourists. How come they are here? Look at them, they think they are at the cinema.’ We observed them, as they sat more comfortably with their legs crossed. He

laughed. Manuel was an Eritrean migrant who landed in Linosa, the tiny island next to Lampedusa, many years ago, following a difficult journey on boat. He worked for EASO as a cultural mediator, and he was in Lampedusa since March 2016. As a former undocumented migrant, Manuel was very critical of people visiting Lampedusa to experience migrant landings, photographing what happened, commenting on it, and as it often happened, manifesting through tears (as one of the internees was doing) their surprise, discomfort, and sense of pity towards them. From his perspective, most people who took interest in the phenomenon of undocumented migration knew very little of what really happened in and through Lampedusa.

Manuel's metaphor of the cinema highlighted the fact that visitors who were allowed to enter the Favaloro pier could watch what happened during the migrant landing as if it was a 'spectacle,' sitting on one side of the cement wall, while migrants were walking to the CPSA bus, and doctors ran to hold the weakest ones. His reflection was subtle. He was critically arguing that the digitalization and spectacularization of the procedures taking place during the migrant landing produced a distorted idea of what the experience of the landing actually felt for the migrants, and the migration workers. As De Genova (2013) argued, the cameras held by migration workers purposely proposed to capture the events of the landing, fulfilling the needs of the political and media discourses which tend to simplify people's experiences in borderlands by the use of reductive categories. But as Manuel was making clear, witnessing a migrant landing could hardly give a sense of the migrants and migration workers' personal experiences of that circumstance. The performative essence of the landing did not just nurture the stereotypes of migrants and rescuers, but also it produced the conditions under which persons were turned into categories, having roles, fulfilling duties, and obeying to predetermined procedures.

As a result, when the lights were lit, migration workers' job began, and their ordinary attitudes changed. Laughs and jokes were put on hold. They were professionals, and they must perform their role. As Gatta (2006-2007) argues, migration workers have practised their moves during the years, while migrants, whose part has never been rehearsed before, become the objects of their subjective response to a spectacle that has been set for them. Naked bodies, skeletal persons shaking from the cold, wounded, hopeless, or thankful to be alive labelled them as bare lives, without a voice, a name, or a definite identity.

The landing thus resembled the spectacular dynamics of a cinema, while 'the audience' was watching, others on stage were acting outside the eye of the camera and the attention of some people in the audience. I needed some time, experience in the field, and engagement with migration workers, locals and migrants, to begin to pay attention to them as they deserved.

In order to try to enrich my understanding of what happened during migrant landings, I would need to meet migrants and migration workers in a different context. In fact, as George E. Marcus (1988) argued in his ground-breaking article on the emergence of multi-sited ethnography, the shifting transition that an ethnographer can experience from one site to another, and from one kind of relationship to the people he or she encounters in diverse contexts, makes fieldwork a complex and multiple space where perspective plays a fundamental role. Being capable of acknowledging it and recognizing how these relationships are formed and how they transform is topical, but also hard to determine, especially within contexts of emergency and vulnerability, where multiple significant events are often observed in silence, because the context suggests doing so. It is a matter of gentleness and sensitivity for each given situation and for the people whom one is willing to write about. Ethnographic writing is an exercise of ‘putting oneself in others’ shoes’ (Jackson 2008) and trying to make others’ *lifeworlds* communicate with the world of the readers (Carrithers 2018). This requires sensibility towards the detail of our experiences, and to its presentation. But of course, perspective played a fundamental role in one’s understanding of life in borderlands, and even if the experience of the landing *per se* helped to constitute migrants’ alterity and migration workers’ function within the system of undocumented migration. For Andersson (2014: 156), the images captured by cameras during the rescue operations and the landing in the case of Lampedusa, ‘both reinforced and undermined the forms of “bare” migrant life seen in the border spectacle.’ For Jackson (2008), the deployment of images of the borderland by the media and the institutions constituted categories of people which deeply reduced their lived experiences and their own sense of the borderland. In order to shed light on the possible discrepancies between what the landing manifests as a public spectacle and what migrants and migration workers make out of their experiences at the border, I will now consider other spaces of Lampedusa which one may deem as ordinary in comparison to the extraordinary event of the landing. First, in the next section I will provide some accounts of migrants’ ordinary life on the island to reflect upon the forms of “bareness” which the spectacle of the border leaves silenced, and their most common forms of “(re)action” to violence and subjugation suffered by the many. A change of perspective, space and scenario can help reconsidering what lies behind the experience of migrant landing in Lampedusa. I will now explore migrants’ past stories, as well as their attitudes towards the present and the future by turning to another site on the island, the Guitiga beach.

## Migrants speak

Migrants could unofficially exit the CPSA from the back hole (see Chapter Two). Many remained inside, but for those who felt like exiting the CPSA, the Guitgia beach was one of their favourite

places. From May to October 2016, the Guitgia beach was usually busy with tourists, police agents or migration workers out of service, and some locals. The Guitgia was a sandy beach, delimited by rocks on both sides. The sand was mainly occupied by tourists, while migrants usually grouped together on the rocks.

As I described in the previous sections, the migrant landing is an extraordinary event (although it has become in the years a quite ordinary phenomenon through the repetitiveness of images and videos presented by the media) where the inclusion of migrants takes place via arbitrarily constituted exclusive and categorizing processes. As a consequence, a large gap between the paradigmatic discourses of the media and intellectuals on borderlands, and the borderline experiences of those people who live at the border, remains unexplored (Mazzara 2019). The Guitgia beach was not a space of interest for the media. However, it was an important space for understanding what life in Lampedusa could look like; a space where migrants, tourists, and locals could meet outside the extraordinary constrictions of the landing (Figure 7).

In what follows I will introduce some of the migrants whom I met at the Guitgia. Their testimonies give experiential substance to the status of bareness which the experience of the landing reiterates, and the digital world commodifies (Andersson 2014). As I argued in the previous section, migrants' inclusion is inherently exclusive; it aims at naturalizing their illegal status and undermining their humanity. Encountering migrants outside the space of the landing helps to reflect upon their otherwise dismissed humanity; to get to know who they are, what they went through before reaching Lampedusa, and how they make sense and daily respond to their experiences as undocumented migrants whilst detained in Lampedusa. The ethnographic extract I will present is a unique set of stories which nevertheless speak of a profound and shared sense of disbelief that migrants show towards their experience of illegal migration. It will also reveal most migrants' capacities to move forward within their life contingencies and life constraints with a hopeful attitude.



**Figure 7. Guitgia beach in the early afternoon, May 2016.**

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2016, when the sun was still strong in Lampedusa, I went to the Guitgia beach for a swim. I noticed a small group of migrants to my right and approached the three boys sitting on the rocks.

‘I saw you were working out, ah?’ I asked, trying to break the ice.

They smiled. ‘Yes, we were doing some push-ups.’

‘Yes, it’s gym time now, right?’ I said.

They kept smiling.

The one with a golden earring and very short hair recognized me from the day before. His name was Barak, and he was a 21-year-old ex-police officer from Gambia.

‘So, you are from Sicilia, yes?’ Barak asked. I nodded and explained that I was a researcher at a University in England. I said that I would like to know something about their life, their stories, and their ideas. Barak seemed enthusiastic, as well as some others in the group. They explained that exiting the CPSA was still a risk for the migrants, because they had to break the rules, and not everyone was willing to risk it. Army officers and police agents were stricter with maintaining migrants inside the CPSA in July and August, when the island was crowded with tourists, while they were much less rigid during the winter. The general hygienic and health conditions inside the Hotspot were below minimum standards. ‘I told the *operatori* [CPSA workers] to leave the bed mattresses in the sun, because it kills the bugs, but they don’t listen’ a doctor of Misericordia di Capo Rizzuto told me. Bugs infected the beds where migrants slept, bathrooms were often broken and, as the doctor added, ‘shit came down from the roof’ where migrants slept, because the pipes were broken. Migrants

like Barak knew that the situation inside the Hotspot was not good, but they usually preferred to talk about the positive side.

‘Certainly’, someone called Rasta concluded, ‘It is still much better than what we had seen in Libya.’

‘Your life is like water on one’s hand’

For most of the migrants I met, Lampedusa was first of all regarded as a land of peace and relief from what they had suffered since leaving their countries of origin. Rasta, an eighteen-year-old Gambian guy, described living as an undocumented migrant in Libya as a life of pure uncertainty. ‘Your life is like water in one’s hand. If you move, the water risks falling, and you will die’, he once said.

I was moved by his words, which so closely reminded me of what Lamin, one of the first migrants I met, also coming from Gambia, had told me, while narrating his long story of the journey to Europe. He said, ‘Your life is like an egg in your hands, it can break at any time if you are not careful.’ Rasta and Lamin’s metaphors were obviously connected by an aura of fragility which they felt heavy on their existence as undocumented migrants. Many of them had crossed the Saharan desert on pick-up trucks. Thousands died, abandoned by the smugglers (Zandonini 2018). They endured thirst, hunger, and various forms of violence in Libya, and crossed the Mediterranean praying to God or Allah<sup>73</sup> to save their lives as many had never seen the sea before. Water was the fluid condition of their life, the precarity of their existence as undocumented migrants. As our discussions at the Guitgia beach carried on, I could get some further understanding of the most common and intimate reasons which made many migrants’ lives so precarious and unsafe.

Mohammed, the teenage boy from Gambia who had been in Libya for about a year, had a lot to say about what he had experienced there. ‘People die of disease, they sleep on the floor, without help’, he said. Among smugglers and other criminals in Libya, ‘what matters is the colour of the skin, and a black person is treated as worse than an animal.’ Mohammed carried on explaining that many of the migrants in Libya are ‘beaten with chairs, iron chairs’ [he had to clarify that chairs were made of iron, harder than wood, and more painful to be hit with], or with rocks, like that one’. He pointed at a stone of roughly twenty centimetres of diameter. ‘It is crazy. They beat as if they have to kill. And you can’t stop them.’<sup>74</sup>

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73 The migrants from Gambia were usually either Christian or Muslim.

74 Many reporters working in Libya have declared, witnessed and shown the presence of vast chambers full of men, women and children, in unsanitary conditions, without drinking water, with negligible quantities of food, so that many cannot stand up. Some of the MSF workers describe the inhumane conditions in which hundreds of people live, forced to sleep on each other, and staggering, and beaten up to fainting, or death (IOM 2017). Complaints from UNICEF and other international organizations show the evidence of varied kinds of torture, abuse, rape, daily changing and changing groups of migrants coming from Eritrea, Somalia, Nigeria, Gambia, Gahanna, Ivory Coast, Mali, Ethiopia, and other countries. These undocumented migrants are witnesses of tortures.



Many of the migrants felt trapped in a situation of constant uncertainty, where they must find a way out of troubles even when this may imply risking their life. Among smugglers and corrupted police, black African migrants are addressed as *barah* (“animal” or “savage”). The extreme conditions under which black African migrants have been and are currently detained in Libya, as Mohammed had briefly pointed out, can have a resonance with Agamben’s (2005) paradigm of the *homo sacer*, the Ancient Roman law figure which is ambiguously standing at the threshold between the sacred and the profane, the animal world and the human world.<sup>75</sup> For Agamben (2003), the *homo sacer* is the original paradigm of the exclusion of a person from the community; his rights have been *de facto* suspended, up to the extent that his or her humanity is legally and politically not fully recognized, because he or she is constantly at the risk of being killed. In a very similar form, migrants like Rasta, Barak and Mohammed depict a context where black Africans smuggled to Libya can be killed indistinctly, without punishment, legal protection or social recognition.

Mohammed added that when he escaped from a prison in Libya and walked for 40 kilometres with his mates to run from a police officer who was chasing them for money. He would have given anything to be back home, he told me, but as Barak explained, ‘Once you are there, you want to go back, but there is no way out. People try to go back, and they are caught and put in prisons. They are left to die. Once you see it with your eyes, you want to go back, because it [the implications of being a black migrant in Libya] is really too hard to take. But you can’t go back anymore.’ Barak looked at me, then added, ‘We are told of what it is going to be like, yes. But we have a saying, which is, “you only understand it when you see it.” So, until you see it with your eyes, you can’t really understand.’

Undocumented migrants are usually kept in what migrants named as ‘connection houses,’ which are compounds crammed with hundreds or thousands of men, women, and children. There is little food and water, and they sleep on the floor in the dirt. They mostly knew what their journey as undocumented would be like before they left their countries of origin. They heard about many others who had died, but they also knew that some others managed to reach Europe. The expectation of improving one’s individual and family status by moving to Europe, is an important push factor for young undocumented migrants who landed in Lampedusa. It is a ‘solution at hand’ for facing economic and social difficulties for many people who live in Gambia, as it is the case of Rasta, Barak, and Mohammed, but also in Ghana, Eritrea, Nigeria, Somalia, Mali, Ivory Coast, Bangladesh (Lucht 2011: 84). Up to their departure, migrants know what their journey will be like, but they have not yet experienced it. As they crossed the desert and reached Libya, they were stripped of their most fundamental rights, turned into *homini sacri*, without legal protection, political recognition, or

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<sup>75</sup> The figure of the *wargus*, wolf-man, belongs to the Ancient Germanic law, and similarly to the figure of the *homo sacer*. It referred to those people who must be banished from the community because they are considered dangerous because of their half-human half-animal condition (Agamben 2003: 116-117).

preservation of their life. They were treated as if they were “other than human,” but also “other than animals,” waiting to either die, or to finally be embarked on a boat to Europe. As Rasta once told me, migrants felt excluded from the human world of human rights, but also from the animal world, because ‘animals deserve respect’, but many of the smugglers and corrupted police officers in Libya did not use any respect towards them. As the figure of the *homo sacer* ultimately rests on a double exclusion, from human law as well as from the divine law (Agamben 2003), the status of undocumented migrants while reaching Europe rests on the exclusion from both the human and the animal world, and an inclusion into another world, which is characterized by violence, torture, and disrespect for life. Such experiences ultimately turned the migrants who reached Lampedusa into the bearers of their double exclusion and living witnesses of what life in borderlands as an undocumented migrant can possibly mean. Many migrants experienced such double exclusion as a nonsensical and unsound form of disrespect, and by speaking out, they projected it to an outer mad or crazy world from which they felt very distant.

‘They can look into your eyes and shoot, and nobody will say anything about it. It’s madness,’ said Rasta, with a low voice. The use of the term “mad/madness” or “crazy/craziness” were common to most migrants I met when they spoke of their time in Libya in particular. Such terms transcended national boundaries, as they were used by migrants coming from Nigeria, Gambia, Ghana, Liberia, Somalia, and Eritrea.

In consideration of these terms (mad/madness or crazy/craziness), the images of migrants who land on the island of Lampedusa, as I described in the previous section, could remind us of the icon of the *stultifera navis* — the boat of fools that Foucault (1965) mentioned in “History of madness” to explain how from Middle Ages to modern times European societies, the representation of madness was linked to the imaginary of disordered madmen, who were often forced to perilous sea or river crossings, crammed inside unseaworthy boats. Like the many stories of the migrants I met on the island testify, their arrival in Lampedusa instead emerges ethnographically as the arrival of those who have made themselves bearers of other’s madness. Mad is for most migrants the experience they went through before reaching Lampedusa; being subjected to violence perpetuated by people who treated them as non-human and non-animals.

Migrants’ experiences of alterity — of otherness from human beings having human rights and dignity despite their legal or illegal status, and their skin colour — were felt as mad situations, where anything, even the worse imaginable event, could happen. Migrants like Rasta were bearers of terrible experiences, but when they told their stories, they often managed to do it with a self-control which I had not expected. Most migrants I met firmly believed that change was always possible, and that life, as water in one’s hands, could be fragile and uncertain, but also fluid and transformative (Chambers

2009). Before enduring in such scope of change, where hope becomes primary source for moving forward rather than falling behind, one must be capable of acknowledging what has happened in one's past and come to terms with the present. Migrants like Rasta and Mohammed seemed to do so.

As they remembered their past, migrants spoke up and gave an account of their existence as undocumented. They said what would have otherwise remained submerged by their condition of illegals whom, because the undocumented migrants, as Giacomo from Askavusa claims, 'can never talk, and when they do talk, their words are uncritically used by the media.' Their stories would remain silenced by the images which categorize migrants as mute subjects, subjected to their condition of illegals and presented as barely capable of expressing their perspective and understanding of the phenomenon of undocumented migration. While they talked about Libya, migrants expressed what they went through before reaching Lampedusa. They do so as they can, with powerful and deeply sad words of their memories, but as they speak, they often look to the sea in front of them. As they look at it, their glance slips from the past to the nearest future as explored in the next section.

### Time and hope at Guitgia beach

It was a sunny afternoon of July 2016 in Lampedusa. Mulbah, an eighteen year old migrant from Liberia, and Sidi, a twenty-six year old from Nigeria, were both staring at the sea, sitting on the rocks of Guitgia beach. 'We don't know if boats come or not. They don't tell us,' said Mulbah. They both looked sad. Migrants were told by cultural mediators, police agents, or doctors inside the CPSA that they would leave the island on board of a big white boat, called Siremar.<sup>76</sup> The Siremar boat used to carry out migrants' transfers to Secondary Stay Centres in Sicily, but migrants did not know that it came to Lampedusa twice a day, once in the morning, and once in the late afternoon. The truth was that migrants were detained inside the Hotspot for weeks or months, and they were not transferred to Sicily because the Prefecture of Agrigento did not approve their transfer. Some migration workers claimed that the reason of it was that the predisposed structures in Sicily and other regions in Italy were already full. Others claimed that the CPSA had to be kept full to justify the great number of people whose presence concerned the system of undocumented migration. In either way, most of the migrants kept looking for the big Siremar boat, hoping that if they saw it approaching the harbour, they could go to Sicily the following day.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Siremar is one of the main companies operating in maritime transport across Sicily, the Eolian Islands, The Egadi Islands, Naples, Pantelleria, and Lampedusa.

<sup>77</sup> The island, most of them said, was "nice," a "good place," but it was not their final destination.

The notion of hope has been variously debated in anthropological literature to understand a widespread sense of dissatisfaction which is common to many people who live in the modern globalized world (Miyazaki 2003; Appadurai 2006; Lucht 2011). This, for anthropologists like Gassan Hage (2003), is the result of a reductive spectrum of expectations which we mostly share and struggle to achieve in life, although the great majority of us may live without ever being capable of experiencing what we hoped for. Following this line of thought, most of the migrants who reached Lampedusa, may be thought of as the bearers of hopeless desires, dreamers who thought to improve their social status and life expectations, experiencing torture and various forms of violence in Libya, detention in Lampedusa, and undefinable time of struggles after they reached Europe. During landing, migrants often appeared as unwarily hopeless people without a name and a story. As the cultural mediator Manuel said, ‘They have no idea of what will happen to them once they leave Lampedusa.’

In fact, if one observed what the migrants did during their time on the island, and engaged in a conversation with them, hope constituted a common feeling among most of them. Hope through God’s help gave them the strength to overcome their difficulties until the moment of the landing in Lampedusa, and hope in the Siremar boat to come (a promising future) allowed them to look forward while they were detained in the Hotspot. When they are in Lampedusa, migrants’ perspective towards the possibilities of a promising future appear to be high, but within hope, there is always the seed of its opposite side, hopelessness and melancholia. Great expectations helped them to endure while waiting in Lampedusa and resist hopelessness.

Most cultural mediators knew about the difficult situations which migrants would be facing because they worked in Lampedusa for a long time, but firstly, because they had been undocumented migrants themselves. Manuel and Vincent’s experiences as undocumented migrants in Agrigento, Sicily, before having the opportunity to become cultural mediators for EASO in Lampedusa, were bitter, and rested on a flagrant sense of distrust that many people manifested towards them, both at work and in their everyday life. In Naples, migrants who wait for their documents and seek a job in Italy are ‘regularly subject to flagrant racism’ and ‘racially motivated attacks are not uncommon’ (Lucht 2011: 4). Similar circumstances are experienced by African migrants in Palermo, Milan, and Puglia. Many of them would become slaves of the black market, underpaid, forced to live in barracks or apartments where they struggle to pay their monthly rents (Ravenda 2012; Sigona 2012). Others asked to be sent back to their home countries or escaped from the Temporary Stay Centres to try their luck and illegally travel to France, Germany, England, and other countries in Europe, where they have family or other working contacts, as I learnt from many of them several months later. These set of experiences lived by most of the migrants who have reached Italy and other countries in Europe during the past decades as undocumented, will no doubt depict a common feeling of hopelessness

and melancholy for often irreparable losses. Some have lost a loved person during the sea crossing, others will lose contact with their travel companions, and struggle to keep in touch with their families, especially during the time in Lampedusa. In the introduction of 'Loss', Eng and Kazanjian (2003) argue that while melancholy can lead to hopelessness, loss can also generate hope. It is not loss per se, however, that generates a positive attitude towards the future, but rather, the interplay between hope and hopelessness rests on perspectives: on how people approach difficult situations, respond to loss, and express melancholia. Ultimately, hope and hopelessness were facets of the same coin: life in borderland situations. To cope with loss was a condition of life for most undocumented migrants. The transformative dialectics between hope and hopelessness ultimately lay on migrants' singular responses to 'unprecedented situations' (Carrithers 2005).

Mulbah opened up to me after a while and talked about his time in prison in Libya.<sup>78</sup> 'Yes, I was in prison for a month. Then I escaped.'

'How?'

'I decided to escape because I knew that if I stayed there [in Libya] I would die anyway. So, I decided to try to escape, and if I had to die, then I would die having tried that.' I asked how it happened.

He paused.

'I had to break a window.'

'A window?'

He showed some of the scars on his knuckles. Remembering what happened back in Libya, he smiled, telling me that he had run away from prison, together with four other guys. Mulbah said that they knew that they could all die, but he still believed that escaping from prison was their best chance of survival.

The scarred knuckles of Mulbah's hands did not only validate his story, but they emerged as a manifestation of hope. Earlier that day, as Mulbah and Sidi did pushups on the rocks, Mulbah explained that strengthening one's knuckles, was very important for them. 'If you will have to hit someone, your knuckles will have to be strong.' Of course, strong knuckles did not only help to fight, but also to escape from a prison as Mulbah did. The young Liberian then explained that back home, families usually encourage their children to fight with one another, and teach them how to respond to someone's attack and defend themselves. According to Mulbah, keeping one's body in good shape was a way of standing up to others' attacks. Strong knuckles and arms helped to respond to troubles, especially because 'war and violence were everywhere [in Liberia], and one must be ready to face it.'

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<sup>78</sup> It all happened because Ruben, a boy from Catania (Sicily) who came to visit the island with his mother every year, asked Mulbah how much he had paid to get to Lampedusa. Mulbah answered that he never actually paid a sum. 'I don't even know how I got here. One day they came and took us saying we had to go. And we got on the boat.' He said. He would later explain that he worked in Libya without being paid for several months. His hard work had been the price he paid for crossing the Mediterranean Sea.

As migrants realized the discrepancies between their expectations of leaving the island soon, and the impossibility of doing so as they would have wished to, most of them almost automatically found possible alternatives to their enforced conditions of detention. Exiting the CPSA despite the risks of being caught by police agents, telling their stories to strangers like me, and making use of their time rather than letting it be wasted, was an invigorating experience for the many of them. Also, being active was for some of the migrants whom I have met, a good exercise that helped them to look forward rather than fall back in their nightmarish experiences. Hope could be a way of making one's world and life conditions meaningful, as a capability of seeing the significance of what one does or ought to do, within its constraints and moments of hardship. In this sense, Ghassan Hage (2003: 15) remarks, hope should be redefined as 'the way we construct a meaningful future for ourselves.' For Mulbah and Sidi, as well as many other migrants (whom I have met), being at the beach, engaging in conversations about their past, or doing physical activities, were ways of turning hopelessness into hopefulness, where hope did not emerge as the trick of globalization which may have originally caught migrants into their journey to Europe, but it rather appeared as a force for endurance and a capability of responding to life difficulties.

As Jackson (2005: xxii) argues 'The world is... something we do not simply live and reproduce in passivity, but actually produce and transform through praxis, creating a sense that life is worth living, a condition of wellbeing.' Of course, most migrants in Lampedusa suffered prolonged detention and indecent conditions inside the CPSA, but going to the beach every day, doing push-ups and swimming, speaking to whoever would be willing to get close to them, often smiling even while telling horrific stories, was a common way of transforming the "madness" they had experienced during their journey to Lampedusa into the engine of their sense of hope. In this sense, hope was not a mere desire to approach with passivity (Miyazaki 2003); for migrants like Mulbah and Sidi, hope was to be accomplished by one's own active contribution to one's desires. The Siremar boat would come to bring them away from Lampedusa, but in the meantime, most migrants found alternative ways of spending their time and make some sense of it.

The previous section thus illustrated Lampedusa as a space going beyond the mere stage where the spectacle of the border takes place. It is a land where migrants' voices can raise against the rather mute images of the spectacle of the border to further define their life condition as undocumented migrants and carriers of mad situations experienced before reaching the island. Lampedusa is also the site where migration workers live their lives, fulfil their duties, and encounter the migrants. If we turn our attention to the experiences of migration workers on the island of Lampedusa, the image of the spectacle of the border can be further clarified. Uncertainty of life and borderline situations cross the Mediterranean Sea with the migrants who carry their experiences with them.

If on the one hand I have described some common ways in which migrants respond to the uncertainty of their life conditions while in Lampedusa by acknowledging the past and projecting themselves into the next future, migration workers struggle to find a balance between their roles and their sense of rightness, humanness, and ethics. The next section will reflect on this, revealing the ethical dilemmas, and personal difficulties of fulfilling the role of migration workers in Lampedusa.

## The absurd life in borderlands

During winter, tourists did not visit the island, a portion of the locals left for work or school, and most bars, pubs, and shops shut down. The island was mostly occupied by local elders, children, armed forces, migration workers and usually not many migrants. Landings took place less regularly than during the warmer months. From January 2017 to March 2017, I counted six migrant landings, an average of five per month, against an average of ten per month during the warmer months. In January, the CPSA hosted about one hundred *guests* for more than two weeks.<sup>79</sup> As a result, migration workers' work was significantly reduced, and most of their time was usually spent playing card games inside the CPSA, attending karaoke nights, making dinners, and drinking at night (Figure 8). They would mostly spend their time together both at work and outside, because 'the island is too small to hide from anyone' Said Selene, the paediatrician of INMP.

Isolating oneself from the other inhabitants of Lampedusa was very hard, especially among the migration workers, whom on the one hand were immediately recognized as '*furisteri*' (foreigners) from the locals, and on the other hand spent most of their time together, either at work, or outside the CPSA, gathering together at the same cafés and bars.

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<sup>79</sup> The number of arrivals primarily depends on weather conditions. Thus, in winter, with the heavy sea, arrivals can stop or decrease significantly in number.



**Figure 8. Migration workers at night clubbing**

In the warm season, when the island was filled up by tourists, the via Roma was crowded with street vendors and shops, and every night people could enjoy music, drinks, and parties on land and on boat. Migration workers mostly participated in all events. Their time outside the Hotspot was for the greatest part spent at the bar, having aperitifs, clubbing and doing karaoke at night. When the sun was up, they could enjoy the beautiful beaches of the island. It was mostly during those moments that they felt like opening up to what had happened inside the CPSA, or what they felt about particularly upsetting events concerning migrants and the ‘inhumane conditions’ in which they were detained at the CPSA. The Eritrean cultural mediator Briani told me about it after the night shift following a particularly large number of migrant landings in August 2016. More than a thousand migrants were detained inside the Hotspot at that time. Most of them had to sleep on the floor that night, and the doctor of the Misericordia di Capo Rizzuto worked for the whole night and following day. Everyone inside the CPSA was overstressed, struggling to face a situation which the CPSA could not manage. Selene, the paediatrician of INMP, was struck by what she saw in the early morning immediately following the landing. ‘I got up at 6 in the morning, and I saw a mantle of thermal blankets on the floor. It felt like being in another planet. I saw the apocalypse.’<sup>80</sup>

Hundreds of migrants had slept on the floor during that night, waiting to go through their third and last medical check, being identified and finally be allowed to have a shower, a set of clothes, and some food and water. Usually the CPSA entrance was left clear, and the migrants occupied the space

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<sup>80</sup> Migration workers like Selene were used to seeing migrants waiting for long hours at the entrance of the CPSA before the medical check and the identification procedures took place. However, the number of *guests* detained inside the CPSA exceptionally reached went over one thousand people, as it happened in August 2016.



outside their dormitories and the doctor's clinic, but following the landing in August 2016, children, mothers, and mostly young men occupied most of that space.

From the apocalyptic planet of the CPSA to the beautiful beaches of la Guitgia and the Rabbit island, there was a gate which most migration workers entered and exited regularly. They could all (with the exception of the doctor and nurses hired by Misericordia di Capo Rizzuto) enter and exit apocalyptic situations within a short time lapse. The world of migrants' suffering merged with the world of tourism, partying, and drinking. As Anna, the gynaecologist from Palermo working at the *Poliambulatorio* once said, migration workers mostly lived 'a surreal situation' on the island. 'Your balance is lost, and your limits are pushed,' she added.

Migrant landings were followed by drinks at the bar. Nights out were interrupted by sudden emergency calls where migration workers stopped drinking or doing karaoke and drove back home to get changed and intervene at the landing. With their uniforms on, they encountered migrants who were shivering from the cold, or suffering from chemical burns. Like a big brother, where long periods of boredom alternate with emotional surprises, one to one challenge, and last-minute elimination, migration workers were called to wear their professional masks when the situation required it and enjoyed their free time when they could do so. This sudden change of contexts was a violent one, and as it became a routine of life on the island, migration workers felt as if their balance was lost, shaken from a context to a dramatically opposed one.

Living as a migration worker in Lampedusa was like living in 'a big theatre', said Anna, where 'everyone somehow has a role; we all have a role, and everyone needs to build a character in a way or another.' If landings occurred within the modalities of the spectacle of the border, because as cinema films, they could be watched and digitally consumed by the audience at home for a short period of time, migration workers could not switch off the TV or change the news channel to something else as they wished to. Theirs was an unpredictable job, because landings could happen at any time of the day or the night. They could take one to two hours, but they could also last for five to six hours, as it happened during the landing in August 2016. Migrants could be healthy, infected by scabies, severely wounded, violently raped. Women pregnant with babies conceived by multiple rapes cried demanding abortion, others entered the CPSA in silence and could not speak for days, because they had lost a loved person during their journey, or because they had been tortured by the smugglers. Facing multiple realities of violence and suffering was ethically challenging for some migration workers. Their role demanded that they cure, rescue, mediate, or legally inform the migrants. The stage where the spectacle of the border was produced was nevertheless a real living space, where migration workers often struggled to hide their personal difficulties, weaknesses and ethical dilemmas.

## Ethical struggles

‘I can’t take it anymore. I need to leave, Ale [diminutive of my name, Alessandro] the infectious disease specialist Fiona would say in her most stressful times. Her need to escape from Lampedusa expressed her difficulties in handling her work inside the CPSA as a professional while keeping her moral integrity. ‘It’s not easy to work in these conditions,’ said Fiona. ‘These conditions’ mostly referred to insufficient hygienic standards at the CPSA and inappropriate medical treatments proposed by the managing cooperatives. These could have harmful consequences for migrants’ wellbeing. Similar ethical challenges have been faced by doctors working in immigration detention centres, reporting serious concerns for their patients from Christmas island, Manus Island and Nauru (Sanggaran et al. 2014). But the ethical challenge for many doctors and other migration workers did not only concern the structural downfalls of an inappropriate medical system for the undocumented migrants as they landed in Lampedusa. ‘As a doctor, one gets used to human suffering’ said Fiona. However, the encounter with the migrants allowed migration workers to understand that in Lampedusa ‘the problem is of a different nature. This is not about human suffering.’ What was it about then? I asked. She took a deep breath and told me about the man in his twenties whom she had visited that morning at the CPSA. ‘I found whipping marks all over his body.’ She touched her shoulders, going down to her hips. Then the stomach and the back. ‘He was full of lashes, I tell you, like a Jesus Christ. Unbelievable.’ Fiona said that the migrant man’s sister had been publicly tortured in Libya and was still there. ‘It’s absurd that all of this happens’ Added Fiona, lowering the gaze.

Besides acknowledging the unacceptable conditions in which medical practitioners had to work at the CPSA, Fiona’s primary concern was about the unjust and absurd treatments suffered by many migrants with whom she worked in Lampedusa. The figure that most closely reminded Fiona of the man she had visited was the one of Jesus, the son of God who was whipped and crucified publicly as a witness of human wickedness. Medical practitioners like Fiona did not have the means to cure them as they wished to, because the wounds they were called to heal were caused by the absurd realities of injustice and violence which they were daily reminded of by the *guests* of the CPSA. Madness was the condition of life experienced by the many migrants before reaching Lampedusa, and some migration workers considered it absurd, something that exceeds reason. Hence, it was absurd, irrational, and it pushed some migration workers to feel like running for cover. The absurd life experiences expressed by the migrants could make them lose their balance, push them to the limits of what could and could not be acceptable, and question their ethical position. As Andersson (2014: 141) writes, ‘migrants and border workers are bound together in what has been called the border spectacle,’ enacted for its only purpose: making migrant ‘illegality’ spectacularly visible (De Genova

2004). For migration workers, however, the grotesque aspects concerning the business of undocumented migration went far beyond the border spectacle and the images it portrayed.

### The business of migration

Vincent, an Eritrean cultural mediator working for EASO, had expressed his opinion on the absolute rationality standing behind what migrants called madness and Fiona defined as absurd. I had recently met Izach, the Guan migrant who was detained in the Hotspot for more than a month, and I realized how frustrated he was. He said that if police agents did not give him a clear answer about the reasons why he was still detained, and a date of departure, he would not keep waiting in patience. ‘They will hear of me, oh yes, they will hear of Izach!’ he said. I spoke to Vincent about it. ‘How can you guys leave someone inside [the CPSA] without giving him an answer for so long? What if he thinks of doing something stupid?’ I was worried for Izach after the conversation we had. Migrants had committed suicide while in detention. It happened in Apulia, in Lock Temporary Stay Centre in England, and in Lampedusa, a few months after I left the field. Migrants detained for long periods of time, uncertain of their destiny, threatened to be sent back to their countries of origin, and waiting for answers that they could not get, killed themselves on several occasions, and keep doing so (Ravenda 2012; Riccio 2002). Vincent knew what I was saying. He had been an undocumented migrant in his past and landed in Sicily roughly ten years before we met. He had lived in Sicily for many years, working as a cook’s help in a restaurant, and now worked for EASO as a cultural mediator. While sipping his drink at the bar, about half an hour after a migrant landing, he said, ‘If he [Izach] died, they [people responsible at the CPSA] would take his body and throw it into the grave, or at sea. What do you think they would do here? Didn’t you see how it works? It’s all about business, Ale. There isn’t humanness. If you are searching for humanness in these people, you won’t find anything. It’s all business, and that’s it... Didn’t you see before during the migrant landing [at the pier], when everyone was searching for his [migrants], going after them for the whole time. They don’t do it to help others, but for work. People like us, like you, like me, can feel guilty, feel bad for these guys [migrants]. Cos’ one tries to be in their shoes and to comprehend them. But very few do that.’

Vincent had no doubt about the fact that most of the people who worked in the system of undocumented migration were in Lampedusa for personal profit rather than moral or ethical reasons. Money, rather than a sense of humanness, moved them to be there. Among migration workers were once migrants who now worked as cultural mediators. For many of them being in places like Lampedusa was emotionally challenging, it reminded them of what they had been through, but also, it gave them the opportunity to legally work in Europe, earn a good stipend, and live a life which they had struggled for throughout a long time. Among the doctors who worked at the CPSA and for

rescuing missions, many were Sicilians who struggled to enter the faculties of specialization in medicine and opted to have an experience in the field to increase their working chances and cv curricula. Others were military agents who were moved to Lampedusa for a period of time and often had been offered a convenient salary. Then there were Frontex agents and experts from Humanitarian organizations, as well as many locals who were employed on temporary jobs at the CPSA. Vincent argued that most people who worked in the business of undocumented migration did it out of an economic need/interest. They did not choose otherwise to be involved in such phenomenon and deal with migrants' needs independently of the profit they made out of it. Vincent's words inspired me to reconsider an episode I had witnessed some weeks before.

It was winter, and the CPSA was nearly empty, with about thirty *guests* inside. Most of the newcomers were Eritreans, and as Rami, a Tunisian cultural mediator working for EASO, realized it, he said loudly, 'Fuck, at least this time they bring us a lot of work [Eritrean migrants]! Let's go to the camp [CPSA]. EASO reigns!' For Rami, more Eritrean migrants meant more work for them inside the CPSA, and more work meant more recognition from other organizations. As anyone else working in the business of undocumented migration in Lampedusa, EASO members' work rested on migrants' arrivals. When migrants were few inside the CPSA, their work could be questioned, and their presence on the island threatened. From a personal perspective, migration workers usually expressed boredom in working at the CPSA when *guests* were a few dozens. Their role was to mediate, inform, take information, cure. Their object was the undocumented migrant, and without migrants, migration workers' purpose on the island disappeared. Vincent carried on with the conversation. 'This world is only based on the principles of economy and profit. Everything rotates around these two things. And everything is planned and decided according to financial and economical laws. So, if a number of people must undertake a sacrifice for the interests of others, ultimately, they will sacrifice them.'

As Andersson (2012:175) powerfully remarks, the sovereign power both abandons undocumented migrants to a risky and deadly path towards Europe and shows its great concern in saving and maintaining their lives. Such relation of inclusive exclusion that the State maintains with the figure of the undocumented migrant is functional to reinforce 'images of the "drowned" and the "saved" in order to serve both compassionate, self-gratulatory agendas and populist discourses of contamination and invasion' (De Michelis 2017: 2). In both cases, economy and profit move the entire system of undocumented migration. The category of migration workers exists in direct relation with the one of undocumented migrants. It makes sense within the context of the Hotspot in Lampedusa, the landings, and the rescue operations; these further exist as political and economic responses to the issue of illegal migration in the Mediterranean. One includes the other, but they both exist through the inherent exclusion of a portion of people whose lives can be sacrificed to nurture

the system of undocumented migration (Andersson 2014). The “bareness” of the immigrant reinforces the spectacle of the border, where ‘border means business’ (Andersson 2014: 83). Thus, the moment of migrant landing served to reinforce what the spectacle of the border aimed to show to its audience: Lampedusa as a frontier where the emergency of undocumented migration is faced with great professionalism, and where the institutions, the European states, the NGOs, and everyone who is involved in the business of migration, daily collaborates to reduce migrants’ arrival and ensuring their protection. Within the system regulating the phenomenon of undocumented migration, migrants’ death was considered as possible outcome of rescue operations, while the legal and ethical issues concerning their state of detention in Lampedusa were often dismissed, because after all, they have been saved from an otherwise certain death.

As Andersson (2012: 105) argues, ‘The border has become a site for ever-growing investments, a place where frontiersmen can look for quick gains and where European leaders can project their fears and visions.’ The sacrifice which the business of illegal migration requires to those who are directly involved in it, concerns, albeit in different gradients and intensities, both migrants and migration workers. If on the one hand many migration workers show their most goliardic and cynical facets during migrant landing, or while partying at night, their foolishness is a protective attitude, an often-unsuccessful attempt to escape from pain, to reduce it, or to exorcise it. I here propose to use the term goliardic as it best captures the grotesque and absurd experiences of most migration workers. Goliardic is in fact a term originally used to refer to the friars and priests who abandoned the conventional religious life in search of a rebellious, errant, and pleasurable life. The term both suggests a thoughtless way of life, but also a spontaneous generosity. In this sense, the ambivalence of the term, which moves across negative and positive connotations, well explains the ethically questionable but hardly definable attitudes of many migration workers who lived in Lampedusa. Goliardy and suffering were however aspects of a same coin for many migration workers. The urge to run for cover and go away from the island, as the need to be out drinking, dancing, and reproducing a joyful atmosphere and a unified community are ethical responses, or survival tactics, which address an important moral question: who helps whom in Lampedusa? If on the one hand, as Vincent explained, the business of undocumented migration was really about sacrificing some for the sake of the economy of the system, migration workers often struggled to detach themselves from the experiences of violence that they ordinarily experienced, albeit from a secondary point of view. By definition, migration workers’ role is to direct, order, cure, inform, and help the migrants. However, encountering migrants’ suffering and recognizing the injustice upon which this rests, can reveal migration workers’ vulnerabilities and reverse their role from helpers to those in need of help.

Through their stories and strategies of handling the real and the “surreal” of life in Lampedusa, migration workers offered an important insight into ethical questions of ordinary life in borderlands — at the geographical and ethical limits. As Andersson (2014: 278) argues, ‘The illegality industry is in a constant state of disequilibrium’ between its proposed aims of reducing illegal migration and the multiple effects which its intervention has had in fostering its business. ‘Here absurdity is more than just purposelessness. It becomes an incongruous, even grotesque split between reality and representation, set in a feedback loop that generates ever stranger *real* results.’ (Andersson 2014: 279). Migration workers lived experiences of the “*real* results” produced by the business of undocumented migration reveal the absurd relationship between what the industry of migration claims to achieve through the constant representation of images of saviors and saved at the border, and the shared sense of a “surreal world” which this produces.

Such sense of unbalance and disorientation from reality is the outcome of multiple aspects of life at the border. In the case of many migration workers, their professional role, personal capability of facing ethically challenging situations, and their emotional balance and perception of reality, were at stake. Their principles of soundness, help, and humanness were constantly called into question for the sake of a purely financial and economical world, in which they lived and to which they actively participated, but not without its consequences.

## The Absurd

After a migrant landing occurring at around 10:30 p.m. on 15 September 2016, counting 120 persons, mostly coming from Sub-Saharan countries, I wrote:

‘The Cristal bar turns into a big gathering place. Inter football team plays in the Champions League. A man screams “what the fuck are you doing? Fuck you!” He gets agitated against a screen which cannot do anything except showing images that will not listen to his complaints or change according to his will. Many migrants, on their casual walk outside the CPSA are standing at the back of the chairs taken by tourists and workers, but it does not matter, because the game must be followed. Today Inter is playing’ (Fieldnotes, 15/09/2016).

I would then add,

‘A landing is scheduled in thirty minutes.’<sup>81</sup> We have to go. We get up, in a moment of silence and seriousness, to do our job. Soon they [migration workers] are all at the dock, wearing jackets announcing the names of their organizations. They keep talking, making jokes and laughing, as they did before. We are waiting for the [migrants] arrival, which is slightly delayed, and in the meantime, we laugh’ (Fieldnotes, 15/09/2016).

About thirty minutes later, a migrant adolescent boy was standing without shirt on the pier, shivering from the cold, walking fast on the rough dock of the old port, barefoot. There was a black boy who could not walk, and who with the help of three other people, was jumping towards the bus, literally dragged by the operators of Misericordie Lampedusa and by doctor Bartolo (medical doctor responsible during landings) who kept him on his feet. This clear-cut contrast between *goliardic* moments and situations of extreme suffering is destabilizing for the ethnographer, as it most importantly is for the migration workers. Retrospectively, if I go back to the feelings that these contradictions generated within myself and in the migration workers with whom I spent my time, I remember a great sense of loss of certainty. Reasonable and unreasonable were entwined into a spectacle that was not a show anymore but turned into the crudest forms of lived experience at the border. At some point during my fieldwork I began to feel entitled even to take some pleasure out of the island, although pain was constantly around the corner. I was at first indignant about those who could laugh under similar circumstances. Over time, I also began to laugh and participate in jokes with the boys. I was indignant of those who entered the pier, which was almost sacred to me, and joked as if they were at the bar. As time passed by, I began sitting at their same bar, doing what I thought was "absurd" until just some time before. Normalizing the exception, emergency, and crystal-clear inhuman treatment suffered by others, became part of our lives. While I myself tried to understand it, discovering profound chasms in the expected reasonableness of being anthropologists in a place like Lampedusa, many of the agents, doctors and cultural mediators with whom I spent most of my time, became a mirror on which I could see my reflection, and at the same time self-reflect.

As the ethnographic insert suggests, the absurd in Lampedusa is not pure non-sense, unreasonable form of reality, or inexplicable event. Absurd is the relationship between the roles that each actor plays, and their experience of the real. Absurd is the awareness and recognition of the basis upon which they were called to act, the existential conditions of others, the reason of their work, and the striking split between their personal life as young, joyful, ambitious and willing individuals, and

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81 With time, I became close with several migration workers, and I was informed about landings by migration workers nearly every time. At times, migration workers received a text message when we were having a drink or going to the beach for a swim. Other times I received a text by Anna, the gynecologist of the Medical Clinic in Lampedusa, or Vincent, the Eritrean cultural mediator from EASO.

the burden of their responsibility, which feels often too heavy to be carried. Absurd is the overlapping situations, experiences, shifts of roles, rules, and atmosphere, which the business of undocumented migration, and the spectacle of the border in Lampedusa, continuously force upon its main participants (Andersson 2014). The kind of crazy situations which undocumented migrants describe about their journey to Europe, and through the sea crossing refer, reveal some facets of the absurd character of the spectacle of the border. Their stories speak of what *homini sacri* suffer, how they deal with such pain, and how their vitality emerges within and despite their state of being undocumented and detainees in Lampedusa. The discrepancies between representation of migrants and the everyday encounter with them on the island of Lampedusa is unsound, but it also reveals the unsound relationship between what the spectacle of the border shows, and what it leaves unspoken. The fixity of roles and stories represented by the media is a mere portion of what experienced life can reveal, if only it is given the chance to have a public voice.

The ethnographic pieces reported above demonstrate that clash between the expectation of fixed roles within the system of clandestine migration, and the varied experiences that all its main characters have of it. After focusing on the ways in which migrants experience the arrival, and wait for their departure, together with their most common ways of dealing with boredom and suffering, the conditions for which Lampedusa emerges as the theatre of the absurd are determined.

The border Lampedusa is the stage where the spectacle of the border takes place, leaving in the background migrants' lived experiences of the journey of migration, and their ordinary responses to their conditions of detainees (Gatta 2012; Andersson 2014; De Michelis 2017). Further, the spectacle of the border does not reveal migration workers' experienced life at the border, where their sense of the real is entwined with the roles that they are called to enact as representatives of the business of undocumented migration. From the perspective of migration workers, roles and individualities are enmeshed with one another, and as a result, an inner sense of uselessness and inadequacy emerges, both professionally and personally. Reflections upon one's position within the system of undocumented migration, and the struggle to face what for some appears as reasonless and for others as a mere matter of facts to be accepted as it is, reveal that within the spectacle of the border, ethics emerges as an introspective and self-reflective attempt to find an equilibrium between what one is called to do, and what one ought to do (Jackson 2008). As a theatre of fictitious reality, Lampedusa is furthermore the stage of lived experiences which hardly appear through the lens of media representations. The imbalance between what publicly appears as real and what is personally experienced as such can lead migration workers to doubt their role, their purpose on the island, and their ethical sense. In the next chapter, I will turn to a critical observation of the ways in which the constitution of Lampedusa as frontier of undocumented migration has had an impact on locals'



everyday life on the island. I will reflect upon the extent to which some of the moral principles expressed by the elders in Lampedusa have been conditioned by the world of profit and economical values according to which Vincent claimed that the business of undocumented migration functioned.

## Chapter IV The voice of flesh

‘You are alive and are condemned to listen to these screams.  
You will not cover your ears because our cry is loud and stray.  
Nothing can stop it.  
Our bodies will land on your shores.’<sup>82</sup>

During the warm season, migrants with chemical burns on their legs and their bottom touched land to then be urgently transferred to the *Poliambulatorio* for medical treatment. Many of the undocumented had lost their lives through the Mediterranean Sea crossing (Frontex 2017). Among the dead, some bodies were never found, but at times, migrants’ corpses were washed ashore, as it frequently happened in the Tunisian coasts of Zarzis (Lageman 2016). Other times, they were caught in fishing nets by the fishermen of Lampedusa or those coming from Mazzara del Vallo, who often used the island as a base for fishing (Enia 2018). In his short documentary ‘Soltanto il mare (Nothing but the sea) on the victims of undocumented migration in the Mediterranean, following the shipwreck of the 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2013, the Eritrean artist Dagmawi Yimer (2016) remarked that migrants’ screams will not be silenced, and their dead bodies will keep haunting the European shores (Dines et al. 2014; Mazzara 2019). Dagmawi Yimer’s documentary stresses the fact that for those who live by the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, it is difficult to remain indifferent to the death of innocent people. The use of sketches depicting simply the horrible experiences of thousands of dead migrants’ journey in the Mediterranean, and the gentle female voice of the Eritrean narrator powerfully convey the sense of horror which the violent act of remaining indifferent to the suffering of thousands of innocent people can trigger in the eyes of an observer. For the people who live in Lampedusa, the ‘loud and stray’ cry of the dead migrants may become so powerful that one could not help but respond to it. However, everyone on the island responds differently. For some fishermen of Lampedusa, the encounter with migrants’ dead bodies was in fact traumatic and caused them to fear the sea and stop fishing for long periods of time (De Michelis 2017).

Nevertheless, for many others observing the ‘ordinary’<sup>83</sup> spectacles of migrant landings<sup>84</sup> from a distance, things were different. As migrant landings took place during 2016 and 2017, and people were disembarked on land, many of the locals kept drinking their coffees, complaining because a new

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82 Dagmawi Yimer is an Eritrean artist who left his country after the 2005 post-election unrest in which hundreds of people were killed and jailed. After crossing the Libyan desert and landing in Lampedusa in July 2006, he worked on several short films and documentaries on the issues of undocumented migration and violence.

83 Based on Veena Das’ use of the term, I here deploy the term ordinary to address its substantially eventful character, and the particularities which are often dismissed or overlooked. The sense of the term can be grasped by Das’ (2007 :7) description, where she writes: ‘I end up thinking of the event as always attached to the ordinary as if there were tentacles that reach out from the everyday and anchor the event to it in some specific ways.’

84 I here refer to the migrant landing as ‘a spectacle’ borrowing the terminology used by De Genova (2004), who critically explores borderland situations as ideal observatories to represent politically charged images of the migrant. Borderlands reinforce the state’s concerns of managing the phenomenon of undocumented migration through a process of inclusive exclusion (See Foucault 1965; Agamben 2003).

‘wave of migrants’ was reaching the island. Based on ordinary situations, conversations, and at times stereotypical attitudes towards “others”, I will describe some locals’ responses to what Dagmawi Yimer (2016) refers to as the ‘loud’ and ‘stray’ cry of migrants’ dead bodies in the Mediterranean Sea. I will do so by questioning the extent to which some can ‘cover their ears’ or ultimately must acknowledge ‘the invisibility and obliteration of the humanity of the dead’, and the ‘criminality and horror hidden under the politics of rescue and the discursive spectacle of the humanitarian border’ (De Michelis 2017: 9). Primary concern of this chapter is therefore to address the historical, economic, and social processes that have determined most locals’ widespread passive acceptance of the business of undocumented migration and its outcomes on migrants’ lives.

First, I will begin by analysing the forms in which economic progress has transformed the *lifeworlds* of many Lampedusani through the decades, and how tourism and the business of undocumented migration had an impact on locals’ sense of possession, reciprocity, and community. Secondly, building on Chapter III, I will further explore the correlation among the business of migration, tourism, and indifference towards migrants’ needs. Finally, in the last section of this chapter, the paradigm of indifference and profit will be questioned by some locals’ widespread sense of disgust for accidentally eating migrant’ flesh via fish consumption. Moved by the inherent contradictions between locals’ fear of Lampedusa being ‘conquered’ by migrants and their growing interest in taking economic advantage out of the business of migration, I consider the extent to which endurance, hope, and mutuality, turn into indifference. In this chapter I will explore the different gradients of mutuality and self-interest, giving and profit that are played out on the island. As I will show, if migrants’ humanity is hardly recognized by the many locals while they are alive, their being human is further pushed away in death. The voice of flesh thus emerges as the subtle, profound, or unbearable speech echoed by the migrants’ deaths in the Mediterranean. For others, the dead are still alive, and to some extent, their scream for being acknowledged as legal citizens, free inhabitants of the world, and persons by all means, is viscerally reverberant.

## Indifference and proximity in Lampedusa

In what follows I retrace an ordinary migrant landing on a summer day in Lampedusa to introduce the situations of passive acceptance, indifference, and intolerance that manifested among many locals, and were explicitly expressed in the complaints of three tourists during a migrant landing in June 2016.

It was a morning of late June, and I did not have the badge granting an entry permit to the Favalaro pier, where most migrant landings took place. My authorization was informally given by

the Coast Guard Commandant. As any other time, the procedure was to stop at the gate and explain who I was to policemen, who often were reluctant to let me in. In consideration of such difficulties, I decided to take a different approach that day. I accepted to have been refused permission by Police and moved to a small dock where I could observe the migrant landing from distance. Next to me were three tourists on holiday: two men and a woman. From their accent, I guessed they came from Veneto, a northern region in Italy. The scene of dozens of migrants waiting to be disembarked on land, sitting or standing crammed on board of a Coast Guard boat, catalysed the tourists' discussion on how to solve the issue of undocumented migration. One man was saying that 'it is now clear that we must create the conditions under which these persons [undocumented migrants] will live in their own places', while someone else added that our current situation does not allow for so many people come to Italy. Their words mirrored most tourists and locals' struggle to make sense of the phenomenon of undocumented migration from a financial/economic perspective and a morally or ethically reasonable one. The woman tourist advised her companions to read the book *Origin* by Dan Brown, where the writer suggests that the historical battle between progress and religion can be solved by the marriage of the two, rather than through the condemnation of one for the glorification of the other. Their discussion expressed diverse possibilities of what they all acknowledged being an urgent problem. I then asked, 'What do people actually do in this respect? I mean, if the next generations will one day ask of any of us, how was it possible? If they asked how we could be witnesses of such atrocities and yet do nothing, what would we say?' They seemed offended by my remarks, and one of them promptly responded, 'What shall we do? What can we do? You, the young generation, are the ones who should do something. It's too late for us.' I asked what he meant by 'too late', and how could the situation be solved so simply as to say that 'they' could do nothing anymore. He answered with a new provocation, saying 'Show us, young people, how you are able to solve these problems, and teach us how to do it.' As the man challenged me, and the generation of the future I was representing for him in that moment, I turned my sight to the Favaloro pier, and realized that the landing was already over.

We stood at the pier and watched what De Genova (2004) refers to as 'the spectacle of the border,' which rather felt as an ordinary day in Lampedusa: African men and women, with some children, packed into Coast Guard boats and guided to land by persons in uniforms, and tourists wearing flip flops and sunglasses in preparation to visit the island. Each of us carried on with his/her own activities, interests, and needs: migration personnel busy in the landing operations, migrants awaiting to touch land, feel safe, and know about their near future, and tourists impatient because their holidays could be spoiled by the arrival of hundreds of people who had been travelling on unsafe rubber dinghies for days. As the Coast Guard boat left the pier, on my right, two photographers stood

on the edge of the road taking pictures of tourists and shouting to them to get their attention. They would be showcasing the pictures in via Roma during the evening and sell them for five to ten euros to the people they had photographed. The large number of cars, scooters and bicycles indicated the boom of the touristic season in Lampedusa, while behind me, the “pirates’ boat” was ready to leave. The pirates’ boat was a touristic attraction, anchored a few hundred meters away from the Favalaro pier. On board were the owner of the boat, a man in his late twenties coming from Naples, and dressed up as a pirate, with his parrot on the shoulder, and two Senegalese men playing the drums,<sup>85</sup> to let the tourists enjoy the beauty of the island while listening to some good African music.

That scene brought me back to one of the three tourists’ comments. He said that there was nothing they (older generations of Italians? common people?) could do. For the Italian tourists visiting Lampedusa on holiday, life, with its evident disparities and gradients of freedom, was something to be accepted as it was. Acceptance, however, has more than one meaning. To accept reality as it is can be to acknowledge what we may not like and find ways of coping with it (Jackson 2011). It can also refer to the experience of the suffering of others from a safe standpoint, minding one’s interests and believing such disparities to be simply a matter of life. As well as the tourist I spoke to, the owner of the “pirates’ boat,” the photographers standing beside the road, and the thousands of people who were on the island that day, kept living their ordinary lives as if nothing particularly exceptional had happened that day.

Retrospectively, reflecting upon the scene earlier described, which repeated itself in very similar ways every couple of days or weeks in Lampedusa during the summer of 2016, I began wondering: at what moment does ethics emerge in people’s lives, and what generates that sparkle of action which determines the difference between closure and openness, exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside? What does constitute intimacy and what does generate distance? The ethnographic material that I will present in the following sections is primarily based on Lampedusani’s oral stories of past and present life on the island. It questions the threshold between locals’ indifference and responses to imagining migrants’ dead bodies floating on the Mediterranean Sea, in proximity to Lampedusa’s shores. Many of the migrants I had seen were barefoot at the landing, and on the roads of Lampedusa. Elderly people in Lampedusa talk about their past as a time where they walked barefoot, with corns – callus on their feet, because they often had no shoes. The activist anarchist group present in Lampedusa is called Askavusa. In Sicilian dialect, it means “barefoot,” and it was chosen as a reminder of Lampedusani’s past life. With progress, locals’ way of living, and their approach to life in and outside the community of Lampedusani, has been transformed. However, as the elders in Lampedusa stressed

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<sup>85</sup> Talla is the son of Mustafà, a Senegalese man in his fifties who worked in Lampedusa and the rest of Italy for about thirty years. When he worked in Lampedusa, he used to carry his son Talla with him. Now Talla is a man in his early thirties who works and lives in Lampedusa as a bartender and a musician. During summer, Talla played on board of tourist boats together with Mustafà, a Senegalese musician who lived in Catania and came to Lampedusa during summer for work.

to me on several occasions, walking barefoot is an experience that teaches how to move firmly on the ground, and to understand life as a process of mutuality, acceptance, and struggle (Jackson 2013b). The metaphor of walking barefoot vividly captures the sense of belonging to a community and living out of endurance, to which I will turn in the following section.

‘There was nothing, and we lived out of nothing’

During the summer of 2016, I spent much time with Billeci, especially in the morning. I would mostly sit next to him, inside his cooling fishing nets warehouse, watching him play cards with other locals, and sometimes being invited to play as well. Billeci was a well-known fisherman in his nineties. He was born in Lampedusa and always lived there. He loved Sicilian card games and he was a quick-witted speaker. On a September morning, as we talked about his childhood as a Lampedusano, he said,

‘We looked for food, we picked up greens or what we could find to boil, and we ate it. It was all about survival, and we knew nothing apart from what was in our surroundings. That’s what we got, and that’s what we had to take.’

Lack of alternatives was the reality of most Lampedusani’s everyday life, threatened by the scarcity of resources, and experienced as a survival. This section explores how hope is strictly linked with enduring in times of poverty and lack of resources.<sup>86</sup> The uncertainty of personal sustainment, the limited knowledge of the outside world and the daily preoccupations with finding something to eat for oneself, left no alternatives to the locals; acceptance of such life conditions was not a choice, but a matter of fact.<sup>87</sup> The ontology of life that many Lampedusani embraced before the development of the industry of fish, the era of tourism, and the phenomenon of undocumented migration, was captured for Billeci by a poem written by Totò — stage name of Antonio De Curtis, the most well-known Italian comedian actor of all times and whose career spanned 45 years until the end of the 1960s. The poem was called “‘A speranza” (Hope). Billeci recited the poem by memory out loud.

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<sup>86</sup> I am here using hope as theorized in chapter III as a point of departure to analyze endurance in times of struggle for survival on the island of Lampedusa.

<sup>87</sup> The notion of hope, which Jameson theorizes as utopia, is thus not necessarily aimed at imagining ‘a better future’, but rather it demonstrates ‘our utter incapacity of imagining such a future... so to reveal the ideological closure of the system in which we are somehow trapped and confined’ (Jameson 2004:46).

I play the lottery every week:  
I take one hundred lire away from my food's budget,  
and I run when Saturday morning comes  
'cause I must play the [football] lottery.

Lying down at night in my bed,  
I build castles in the air, in the hundreds;  
I take the lottery sheet from the nightstand wardrobe,  
I turn it around, and turn it again, until I fall asleep.  
I feel good the whole week,  
only on Monday I feel a bit down,  
but on Saturday with my hundred lire in hand  
I go back to play once again.

I win nothing, I know... but, who cares?  
I solely live by the hope.  
Who shall I blame if this is my faith,  
if this is my destiny... what shall I do?

Since I came upon this system  
I am a millionaire for the whole year.  
People may tell me: - Are you dumb?  
So, don't you play to cash in? –

If I had already won a million<sup>88</sup>  
I would by now already be a desperate man.  
Instead, I live with my head in the moon,  
I always have the hope to win. [My translation]

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88 A million lire were a huge sum in the 1950s, 1960s Italy, the time the poem is referring to.

Billeci believed that only by having a capacity for endurance, and a balanced sense of knowing one's limits, as well as trying one's luck, people could carry on with their lives; even the most apparently miserable ones. The old man recited Totò's poem expressing his fascination towards human beings, which he compared to a 'macchina perfetta' (perfect machine). 'If it were different, it would be worse', he said. The old man acknowledged life as it was, with its contingencies, struggles, and difficulties. However, Billeci believed that despite one's temporary conditions, there could always be room for change. With his cheeky smile, he carried on,

'We are born to grow and progress. Otherwise, what were you born for, if you stay the same? Man needs to move forward, and to look forward, otherwise he<sup>89</sup> stops, otherwise he dies, as if he has never existed from the beginning... it is a perfect machine... Then, if one starts entering a more complex discussion, it is better to stop talking, otherwise we risk saying the wrong things.'<sup>90</sup>

For Billeci, human beings are inherently driven by a force to move forward in life, to progress, transform, and change their being in the world. What fascinates Billeci is precisely such human capability of moving forward, which comes from the need to develop, looking for stimuli, and giving meaning to one's life. Such attitude towards growing and transformation is needed, and being able to look forward, therefore to hope, is a trend common to all human beings, independent of their social, cultural and historical contexts (Jackson 2013a). The one described by Billeci, as Jackson may put it, is an existential tendency that is expressed in very diverse forms and so makes each individual different yet similar in the resistance to steadiness and the quest for change. Jackson (2011: ix) puts it powerfully: 'though it is rare to meet people who are completely and permanently satisfied with their lot, it is rarer to meet people who expect nothing of life.' With time, most locals met their expectations of a better life; one in which people would not be forced to pick up figs and endure in conditions of poverty. Like the millionaire who won the lottery in Toto's poem, Billeci would explain that many Lampedusani have gained their prizes, and life has changed greatly.

'Listen to Giovanni [referring to himself] who is one hundred years old.'<sup>91</sup> Billeci said, with a determined look. 'I saw my grandparents, my parents, myself, my children and now even my grandchildren. I remember my grandfather. He wore patched and ripped trousers. My father was just a little bit better off than that. Then myself, I was still a bit better, and then my children and

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89 "Man." In Italian the substantive is masculine, but it is intended as universal. However, there is an obvious historical root to the predominance of the masculine pronoun.

90 'Alla fine, chistu è. Nascemu pi crisciri e progredire. Sennò chi ci nasci a fari, se resti u stissu? L'uomo avi bisognu di pensare sempre avanti, e di vidiri avanti, sennò si femma, sennò è mottu, è comu se non ci fussi statu mai dall'inizio... Nenti, è na macchina perfetta... Poi se uno comincia a ntrasiri nta discussi chiù complessi, è megghiu firmarisi e non parrari chiù, sinnucca rischiamu di sbagghiari a parrari.'

91 One hundred years old is an approximate number used to stress wisdom. Billeci was actually ninety-six years old.



grandchildren. It all went towards improvement. So, we can't say that there is no wealth nowadays. We are better off than we used to be. We used to eat bread and onions, however now they eat Nutella. You see this in Lampedusa. All these speedboats, all these boats and stuff, I mean, it really developed through the years...'

Progress and material possession grew in Lampedusa, but locals responded to wealth in a very similar fashion like the man who won the lottery in Totò's poem. Wealth, Billeci said, has without doubt increased. But with the increasing of wealth, many families on the island began having land and property disputes.

'We have got nothing'

'Some people say, this is mine. This is my land, this is my house. But, is it really yours? When he will be gone, he won't be there anymore, and the land will still be there. Same for the house, and for everything else. Then you may leave your land to your children. The son will come and say: "Well, this is mine, my father passed it on to me". But, what did he pass on to you? The land is there, and when you will be gone, it will still be there. [He smiled seeming gratified, with a soft laugh that is typical of who knows that he cannot be cheated by life]. And Lampedusa? How long has it been here? And we claim that it's ours, that this is our place. But how long has it been here for? When we'll be gone from this world, Lampedusa will still be here. [He smiled and added] We have got nothing.'

The extract above is a powerful self-reflective moment capturing with simple words the transient and uncertain condition of being human, and the often-mistaken value people tend to give to material possessions, holding onto a sense of ownership which is ultimately ephemeral, as it is life. Billeci's words reverberate as a wake-up call for the many Lampedusani whose lives have been slowly absorbed by the value of money, and their existence importantly intertwined with the growing of material possessions. As Billeci remarks, in the recent decades, locals were keen on claiming their ownership of a house, a portion of land, and to some extent, of the whole island of Lampedusa. In this sense, human identity can be equated with material ownership. However, this is illusory as wealth produced preoccupation and fostered a selfish and profit-oriented attitude which grew fast among the locals.

'Nowadays [Billeci said], there is more wealth, but also more worry. Such worrying is the real problem. In the past, surely there was not more wealth, there was more poverty — no doubt, but there was less worry. Of course, because there was next to nothing, so there was nothing to worry about. Nowadays, if you see a piece of bread over there, on that chair, I take aim and shoot you right from

this spot.' Billeci mimics the gesture of holding the invisible gun. 'Cause, I don't want you to take that bread, I want it.'

With this image Billeci makes it clear that one's reaction to a threat of losing one's property, which is no different when the prize is as minimal as a breadcrumb on a chair, can be violent and accept no excuses.

'But then...' I asked, 'Why is that that when you were younger things were different?' Billeci promptly answered that: 'Once there ain't no bread on that chair, and you couldn't want it, neither could you shoot at anyone.' He laughed. 'There was nothing, and we lived out of nothing, that's why there was more communality, all together. And he used his hands crossing his fingers together to create a sphere and clarify the concept. 'Nowadays everyone just cares for oneself, and wickedness is everywhere.'

On the metaphoric chair imagined by Billeci with a chunk of bread resting on it, to represent the bare minimum of the good a person may need, once upon a time there was nothing. Therefore, the very possibility of taking hold of it was practically non-existent. Billeci depicts such situation without judging past or present life on the island in the terms of absolute good or bad. His understanding of the human being as a perfect machine comes from people's need to move forward in life, within various contingencies. For Jackson (2011), endurance is a form of acceptance of the real situations in which one lives, but it is also a way of going beyond the often-unreachable gap between what one has or wishes to have, and what one can achieve in life. As Billeci's words suggest, a person who is not capable of looking forward risks to be won by life, of falling in the false belief that we are what we own. Being stuck in the possibility of losing what one owns, or to never be able to achieve what one wishes for, can lead to a morbid attachment to one's possessions, and generate fear, anxiety, and preoccupation.

Billeci had comprehended that material goods are necessary but can be ephemeral if they become the cause of preoccupations and closure to others. As the old Lampedusano had said, 'life-experience is our teacher.' Those who grew up into the habit of picking figs from the trees in order to have something to eat for the day, developed an awareness of the hardship of living, which allowed them to master it without being too pretentious. Those who instead, children of the most recent times, have been used to have more than their fathers and grandfathers, struggled to develop such abilities. This is the reason why Totò was for Billeci one among the greatest men in the world; because he had recognized the subtle discrepancy between the tormented preoccupations among some about material goods, and those others whom, by owning very little, are nurtured by hope.

## To have and to be

The section on Billeci emphasizes the inverse relationship between the capability of accepting what life offers and communally work towards the future, and the struggle to live on material possessions without the consequent tendency to fear its loss. Billeci's words have been highlighted as short dialogues having the purpose of summarizing basic notions on life and survival shared among the many elders in Lampedusa I have spent time with. Their concerns towards the progressive phenomenon of shutdown among the members of the community, and growing preoccupations leading to an egoistic approach to life, worried many elders. When we come to terms with the dilemma of preoccupation that grips the growth of material goods, or in other terms the pressure of acquiring new ones and the possibilities of losing what one owns, Totò's poem speaks to us: 'sad is that man who owns, because he fears he can lose everything, while always happy is he who has nothing and only lives up to the hope of tomorrow.' Billeci's narrations on people's life through the past decades juggle between a lucid analysis of progress, which led to an improvement of life conditions, and the awareness that contextually there was an increasing concern for oneself, and wickedness towards the others.

For Billeci, progress had importantly impacted on Lampedusani's sense of life, their mutual relationships, and their sense of the material world in two fundamental ways. On the one hand, progress made itself visible through the evident growth of boats, tourism, and material goods on the island. On the other hand, it revealed its other side by drying up people of the sense of community that once was more generally felt. 'Among us, there was togetherness' the old man remarked. Billeci's words must be considered critically, as personal reflections which do not only describe a widespread sentiment among many Lampedusani. Even though he might have not directly benefited from the booming of tourism or the industry of migration, Billeci expressed his personal sense of melancholy for a lost past and a present he could not quite recognize as familiar. Yet, he has lived through such transformation, and to some extent, he has also become embedded into a world which stand in direct opposition to the one he was born into. The invisible sphere that Billeci shaped with his hands, referred to a sense of community which belonged to a time where 'there was nothing, and we lived out of nothing'

To have nothing may be interpreted logically – following the tradition upon which the concept of having is linked to capitalism – as the lack of material possessions, and the absence of goods (Jackson 2013a). But having nothing, in the sense of owning little or nothing, determined most locals' sense of endurance, hope, and will to move forward. To survive out of nothing meant to have the will to mutually help each other and endure in everyday life difficulties. Having nothing seemed to determine a close community among Lampedusani. Having more instead seemed to provoke

indifference towards others and a shared feeling of preoccupation. For the many in Lampedusa, to have economic opportunities and ownership on land and properties generated an illusion of juxtaposing who they were with what they owned. Such attachment to material possessions among many locals caused a growing sense of anxiety towards the potential loss of what they had gained in time. If one wants to read Billeci's narrative through the poem of Totò, most locals' potential desire for winning the lottery turned into a plausible reality, fostering individualism and increasing their wickedness.

From Billeci's posited anecdotes, it is clear that with the development of profit, preoccupation for gaining what one owns or believes to own grew, determining a less reciprocal and more fearful and violent reaction against whoever is believed to be a potential threat for one's possessions. It can be one's house, a piece of land, but even the island of Lampedusa itself. If closure won over mutuality, deeply influencing the social and family relationships among many locals who once lived as a strong community, to what extent did profit, tourism, and the business of migration impact on locals' sense of closure towards migrants? In the next section, I will shift the attention towards the particular outcomes that the industry of migration and tourism has had on many locals' sense of altruism and reciprocity towards people in need.

## Money, an ugly disease

When I discussed with Vincenzo, the old cemetery gatekeeper of Lampedusa, about the strange relationship between many locals and the business of migration, he the old cemetery gate keeper of Lampedusa, told me that profit was nothing but a 'disease.' In front of a cup of coffee, he said,

'People are like that. Money is like a disease... An ugly disease. You see, those who have less, give more, and those who have more, they don't want to give anything... Like the Parable of the widow, whom passing by the poor man gave him a coin. But she only had that coin for herself, and she gave it away. So, do you believe that God did not reward her? When she had nothing, and gave all she owned?'<sup>92</sup>

He seemed hopeless. As Billeci had explained, profit had drastically changed locals' way of life on the island, turning the many into selfish individuals. Growing economic opportunities affected most people on the island as a disease which broke some of the most important Christian precepts — like the one of humanness and reciprocal help. 'If all people could give something to others, we would be

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92 Luke 21: 1-4, Holy Bible. New International Edition.

different. People would have more humaneness, and it wouldn't be a bad thing, and things could be better' said Vincenzo, looking around to his fellows, sitting at the bar in via Roma, the main road of Lampedusa. As he observed the surroundings, he said, he felt as if something had really changed from many decades before. 'It's not the Lampedusa I knew. Are these people Lampedusani? Well... people who don't believe in anything, saying that God does not exist because when they need it is not there... God can't always help, and all I hope is that He will forgive my sins.'

The presence of God during times of struggle for subsistence seemed to have been replaced by the advent of money. The kind of survival earlier described by Billeci as the condition of life for most locals on the island during the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, pushed people to hope in the better, and believe respectfully in God. As tourism grew and undocumented migration turned into a resource of profit, humanness fell under the desire for profit, and making profit out of others' suffering, which was morally condemned in the past, became a socially acceptable "rule of life" for the many. Sharing and helping each other was the condition of life in Lampedusa. Fishermen needed to work together when the sea was high, and to look over each other. In the meantime, the people on land had to cultivate the land, prepare food, and deal with everyday fatigues, also to allow fishermen to eat, get worm, and rest, before they left for sea. People shared what they had, although they mostly had close to nothing; a piece of bread, a handful of figs, or whatever they could collect. Like the widow to which Luke (21: 1- 4) refers in the Holy Bible, locals often gave away all they had, because they knew that someone may have needed it more than they did, and because in Lampedusa, as Vincenzo explained, 'people knew the value of reciprocity.' Helping at sea was the unspoken rule of fishermen. Everyone on the island confirmed it. It was a moral precept which united all fishermen, and which had no exceptions. However, with the growing control of the Mediterranean Sea by the State, fishermen who happened to rescue migrants at sea have been accused of "favouring clandestine immigration". Their fishing boats were detained for weeks or months, and their work suspended. Locals had suffered for secondary traumatization, by finding dead, decomposed body parts in decomposition on their fishing nets, rescuing perilous people in peril at sea, and turning their backs to them even if that would entail breaking the law of the sea, according to which, as Vincenzo said, 'if you see anyone at sea, you must save him.' As laws regulating illegal migration and sanctions became stricter, many in Lampedusa reconsidered the principles of reciprocity constituting their community and sociality. Humanness was once reproduced through collective and mutual necessities which shaped the life of the inhabitants of Lampedusa. As such necessity to hold the community tight and strong against the perils of life on the island ceased to be, humanness did not pay back as it used to in the past, as the next section further highlights.

## Fat with money: The metamorphosis of Lampedusani

‘It’s all *mancia mancia*,’<sup>93</sup> (literally ‘eat-eat’), Vincenzo explained, complaining about the system of undocumented migration in Lampedusa. ‘Misericordia is part of it, and many organizations working for the immigrants do the same.’ Misericordia is the name used by two organizations in Lampedusa. One is Misericordia di Capo Rizzuto, the cooperative which was responsible of the Hotspot during 2016 and 2017, when it was joined by the Red Cross. The other is Misericordie Lampedusa, an NGO made up by volunteers, mostly from Lampedusa, who provide for disabled and elderly people, and participate in the migrant landings next to the doctors. Doing *mancia mancia* on the business of undocumented migration was most common among those whom Vincenzo referred to as ‘*i tistuni*’ (the big heads), managers and business people working for Frontex, EASO, Save the Children, or the Navy. ‘They are the ones who ‘eat’ on it’ [on undocumented migrants’ life conditions], who take advantage of the business of undocumented migration without considering its implications on people’s lives. Vincenzo did not know exactly what happened at the headquarters of Frontex or the Navy, but he knew that thousands of migrants kept dying in the Mediterranean. He had seen them, touched them, and buried them for many years, when the industry of migration was still in an embryo stage, and locals took care of the few migrants who reached the island every while, as alive or dead. The industry of illegality upon which undocumented migration rested was for Vincenzo a reality which he had experienced for decades as the gatekeeper of Lampedusa, abandoned by the institutions and the State. *Mancia mancia* refers back to an image of satiety<sup>94</sup> – an irrepressible hunger for profit – which is expressed verbally through the sphere of food. What Vincenzo referred to as *mancia mancia* did not merely concern *i tistuni*. As one of the founders of the Collective Askavusa remarked through his post on Facebook: during the summer 2016, even if many Lampedusani were not directly involved in the highest hierarchies of the business of undocumented migration, they took profit from it. Hotel owners took profit out of the military personnel permanently living on the island, and restaurants and supermarkets increased their yearly income. The industry of migration also worked in a precarious balance with the one of tourism, and during summer, the locals who worked with tourism, mostly pushed for the *guests* of the CPSA to be kept inside, because their presence around the island, often caused alarm among the tourist, or upset them. The post on Facebook critically highlighted some of these fundamental issues:

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<sup>93</sup> Idiomatic expression referring to a limitless use of resources, often at the expenses of other people.

<sup>94</sup> It refers to the pronounced stomachs of locals to which Frapane pointed out.

*My translation in English*

The wind blows hard in Lampedusa,  
It makes the house doors slam closed,  
It breaks the boats at sea  
And then, there's another more powerful wind,  
Which changes people's minds.  
It's neither sirocco nor Levant.  
It's called 'the interest of the day.'  
If you made a lot of noise until now  
So that shit about someone came out of your mouth,  
This wind turned you into a flag and cane,  
With a pasta dish, and the promise of a job,  
Now you make a Saint out of your enemy.  
And as if you had no memory,  
You sit beside his chair.  
It's not one person, or even two.  
It seems that there is no shelter from such wind.  
And someone's coherence is seen as a strange thing.  
The wind always blows in Lampedusa.  
Therefore, the air is never dirty.  
Then I wonder, where does such dirt go?  
And I always hope that it won't be heading my way  
Giacomo Sferlazzo  
09/06/17

Lampedusa is a land exposed to the winds, but Giacomo writes about a kind of wind that is different and does not only break the house doors or the boats. It is so powerful to be capable of changing people's minds. He calls it 'the interest of the day'; daily profit, powerful enough to turn people into 'flag and cane,' whose thoughts and actions are constantly subjected to the force of convenience. For Giacomo, many people in Lampedusa responded to profit as flags and canes do to the wind.

This arbitrarily fragile character of many locals manifest itself for just basic meal, or the promise of a job. The kind of corruption that Giacomo recounts describing some of the dynamics of the island, is a cheap selling of one's ideals, aspirations, dreams, hopes, opportunities, and a sense of good, in turn of some basic material certainties. The poet is critical of his own community because he realizes that fear primarily wins over courage, and change is seen as a further possible danger by the many. He claims that memory is lost among the people of Lampedusa, and many just follow their own

convenience, despite what happened until that moment. Enemies (the government, the local bureaucracy, the EU, the migration workers, or the migrants) can become best friends, as long as a personal income would be ensured as a result. ‘Without memory, this is the thing, that people have no memory,’ said Giacomo many times. As he himself suggests, memory is perhaps not really absent, but rather blown in different directions by the wind of personal interest. Media, for example, barely have mentioned that with the development of tourism, during the 1980s and 1990s, locals’ life had drastically changed. Tourism brought people to the island, and people brought money. Restaurants, hotels, boats, cars and scooters grew exponentially. Many fishermen kept their boats for fishing during the colder months and turned them in tourists’ boats in summer. Lampedusa flourished economically and as more opportunities for making money grew, tourism became not just a convenience, but an inherent condition of life subsistence on the island of Lampedusa. As tourism developed, and the business of migration grew exponentially towards the end of the 1990s, there was a new and never experienced before mediatic and political attention towards the island of Lampedusa. What appeared externally as a form of political interest in fighting the business of migration in Lampedusa, ultimately generated an intimate, silent and often invisible sense of living in absence for the many inhabitants of the island (See Chapter II). Locals suffered from a dysfunctional sanitary system, water supply, and political care towards their everyday needs, as well as physical and psychological support during and after extraordinary tragedies. Migrants on the other hand had been most profoundly kept in a condition where they could either die or be saved at sea. When they survived, they were further abandoned by a state which promised to help, and often failed to fulfil its promises.

Cicciu, the builder who works at the cemetery, once said that ‘Lampedusa should thank what happened with immigration. Thanks to it [immigration], it [Lampedusa] has been known in the world.’ Such exposition to the national and international public had a positive impact on Lampedusa’s economy. On the one hand, many of the locals were hired inside the CPSA. They would work as *operatori*, and have a stipend on contract. Renewal was not certain, and many were fired to then start working again for alternative periods of time. Yet, as Gianluca, the bus driver of the CPSA said, ‘it was still better than nothing.’ Restaurant owners’ income grew exponentially. Tourists grew year by year, and migration workers did as well. By 2016, the military personnel on the island reached the thousand. They had agreements with restaurants and hotels, which offered them a generous discount and ensured them clientele for the year.

‘Now the baby bump is no longer that of women, but the one of men. The *Lampedusano* did not suffer from a proper anthropological change, but rather from a metamorphosis’, said Fragapane, mayor of Lampedusa twice in the 1980s and 1990s. For many Lampedusani, a metamorphosis had



taken place, turning them into people being endlessly pregnant (fat with money), hoping for their stomachs to grow bigger (accumulating more money). In referring to *Lampedusani* growing a baby bump, Fragapane uses an image that is a metaphor of abundance and prosperity, which is representative of a portion of people who took advantage of the economic opportunities arising from both tourism and migration. Big stomachs are here deployed as signs of greediness, although the comparison to being pregnant is slightly dysfunctional. A pregnant stomach, one may argue, is not about greediness and over consumption, but it also signifies life and also precariousness and the need for delicate movement and carefulness — in terms of the fear of losing a baby. The contradictory image of the Lampedusano who is pregnant with money is captured significantly by the dialectics of greediness-cum-carefulness and fear, and it elucidates the practically intrinsic relation of life with progress. Pregnancy signified protection for the loved baby — money in the metaphor used by Fragapane — and the risk to lose it, could generate fear, as well as a violent response towards anyone deemed dangerous for the *fetus*. Worried about their income, their families, and their personal interests, many in Lampedusa, across the older and the very young generations, lived to work, instead of working to live. As Hannah Arendt (1958) remarked in analysing the outcomes of growing wealth conditions and material interests within the mass society of the contemporary society,

‘None of the higher capacities of man was any longer necessary to connect individual life with the life of the species; individual life became part of the life process, and to labour, to assure the continuity of one’s own life and the life of his family, was all that was needed’ (Arendt 1958:321).

Economic convenience and insurance of the wealth of locals’ families was a crucial point to try to understand where the baby bumps of many Lampedusani came from, and what they could deliver to the community of Lampedusa. The community of Lampedusani had metaphorically eaten the *seed of profit*, and in many respects, its inhabitants had learnt from the principals of individualism fostered by the modern society (Arendt 1958). In this respect, the words of poet Giacomo interestingly illuminate Fragapane’s words by stretching the extent to which the force of profit can transform one’s belief, ideal, or word according to its needs. Giacomo’s poem shows where ethics becomes an abstraction of one’s thought which finds no application in real life, especially when faced with the temptation of having something more than one used to own, together with the fear of losing it.

In the light of Giacomo and Fragapane’s accounts, the expression *mancia mancia* can be further contextualized. The *mancia mancia* depicts an image of greed, a hungry crowd which will not stop eating until the last available bite. To do *mancia mancia* on the phenomenon of migration is something Vincenzo reflected in repulsion, as many others on the island. Locals, cultural mediators, and migrants themselves, talked to me about migration in Lampedusa as ‘a market of human flesh.’

Locals all knew that undocumented migration was not a natural phenomenon, a series of tragic events, or an unforeseen force which the government had more or less failed to control in the years. ‘Emigrating is a historical phenomenon’ said Fragapane. ‘But ‘the one we have here is not migration at all, these *naufraghi* (shipwreck victims). They are poor wretches who find themselves in desperate situations.’

The making of people’s flesh into an object of profit was an ethnographic metaphor which reflected the thesis according to which the perspective of personal interest had been contagious among many locals. With time, the paradigm of profit turned into a disease-like common attitude. People began obeying the rules of profit, according to which *homo homini lupus*, and as wolves, many in Lampedusa have learnt how to prey on the weaker ones, making use of their conditions of vulnerability. But while wolves typically prey for necessity, humans’ behaviour can express a kind of greed that is little known among the animal world. As Billeci well elucidated, subsistence was not a major issue anymore as time passed by, because people owned more and more, trousers were cleaner and less ruined by the hard work, and people’s lifestyle changed. However, people seemed to be developing a different kind of hunger, based on the progressive accumulation of material resources.

Hunger for profit concerns an outside space, in the sense that it deals with others – others’ misfortune, suffering, difficulties, even death – from a perspective which creates and perpetuates a certain distance between those who make use of others misfortune (locals taking profit out of the business transversally produced upon migrants) and those who are subjected to such dynamics (undocumented migrants in the specific case) As I have noticed, the profitable use of others determines disintegration both within the community of Lampedusani, and towards undocumented migrants, whose presence becomes precious for most inhabitants’ economic interests. Abandonment and exclusion are the outcomes of such tendency towards self-improvement. As a result, many locals seem to express some kind of blindness, indifference, and lack of interest towards migrants’ needs.

As I will describe in the following section, locals’ indifference rests upon a particular historical and present context where Lampedusani feel threatened by the outsiders. Again, the inherent fear for losing what one owns, and some locals’ visceral attachment to the island described by Billeci, can trigger a self-defence mechanism which determines an emotional detachment from others’ life situations (Jackson 2005). In the following section I will analyse what ethics looks like from the perspective of locals’ life on the island. I will do so by reflecting upon how some locals responded to borderland situations, or situations at the limit (Nussbaum 2011); either by acting as if the recognition of migrants’ humanity never took place, or by having visceral responses to what Dagmawi Yimer (2016) referred to as ‘the screams’ and ‘cry’ of the migrants who died in the Mediterranean Sea.

## No mercy for others' flesh

Undocumented migrants further assume various roles and embody different political discourses. They are either the people in need of “*misericordiosa umanità*” (merciful humanness) or the lazy ones who take advantage of the generosity of the Italian government and are the horde of people who will conquer Lampedusa soon or later (Lucht 2011; Andersson 2014; Ben-Yehoyada 2015; De Michelis 2017). ‘It’s a matter of time’, said Billeci. ‘They will take us, and we’ll be gone. It’s history, you know, that’s how it works. Remember,’ he added. ‘Who shows mercy for others’ flesh, his flesh will be eaten’. To have piety of others’ flesh, that is to help someone in need, to open one’s door, and to let him in, is dangerous, because ‘If you let a friend in your house, with your wife, be sure that they will do something together. There is no doubt about this.’ The image of the friend with whom one’s wife will cheat if one will let him in, is representative of a particularly male locals’ fear for something or someone to take away what they mostly care about. Trust here emerges as a dangerous openness towards the outside world, represented by the friend, whom despite being a close person, is imagined as belonging to an outside sphere of intimacy and therefore trust. Intimacy and trust are further questioned by the object-like figure of the wife, whose arbitrary choice to betray her husband is subjected to the willingness of the friend. In this illustration, a double sense of mistrust emerges from the perspective of the Lampedusano male. One is towards the external yet close figure of the friend, and the other is directed to the more intimate and internal figure of the wife. In other words, mistrust moves across gradients of intimacy, generating animosity and revulsion not only toward the other ‘other’ (the friend), but also toward the intimate other (the wife).

Such negative attitude towards the other, even when we are referring to a friend, can be traced back in the historical memory of the elders in Lampedusa, whose approach to the first explorers of the island during the 1970s, and 1980s, was described by Jacopo as ‘poor’, because Lampedusani were ‘really poor of experience.’ He said it as we sat at the square in via Roma, ‘cause they [tourists and business people] could fool us as they liked, the smart assess I mean.’ And he held the thumb up on his cheek, the hands closed up, to move it down to the jaw. This is a common gesture that in Sicily refers to somebody “being cunning”, or by assertion “being Mafioso.” ‘We were not used to so many people crossing our way until when? Until thirty, maybe forty years ago.’ In the 1980s and 1990s the tourist industry boomed on the island. Locals quickly met wealthy foreigners who appreciated the wildness and remoteness of the island, seeing its potentials and buying land, building hotels, and creating their own activities.

‘So, when they came, it was hard, and many Lampedusani didn’t know how to respond, as they should have. Many came to buy lots of land, houses, and they made a big deal out of it. They mostly made a

fortune through the years by taking advantage of those who knew nothing about money and land at that time... they could do anything they liked, because they knew so much more than we did. This was the situation back then.'

Locals learnt with time about the potential economic value of the land they had lived on in conditions of semi-abandonment from the Government since the repopulation of what they referred to as 'the rock.' Many in Lampedusa have become victims of the economic growth from which they have been excluded by those who have played on their naive sense of reciprocity, trusting what many *straneri* (strangers) had proposed to them. This is the reason why Jacopo calls the many who have bought lands and built activities on the island with the name of *scaltri* (shrewd, sly people). They have been able to take advantage of the "virgin land"<sup>95</sup> of Lampedusa, so that a consistent part of the tourist and commercial activities does not belong to locals.<sup>96</sup> As tourists and entrepreneurs took advantage of many locals, buying their lands for convenient prizes and turning them in money generating machines, Lampedusani have learnt how to distrust newcomers and take advantage from others. They had to learn how to defend themselves. This led to a visceral form of attachment to the island. The fear of losing one's land turned into a developing sense of possession. Here land must be understood as having two meanings, one in the sense of property (as in one hectare of land), and the other is about a sense of rootedness, the land as an entity that people share.

Moved by the fear of being wiped out by African migrants, as they were by rich newcomers in the past, Lampedusani like Mario, a construction worker in his seventies, used to claim that 'They [migrants] should all be put into a cage and drowned at sea.' Mario's and many others' expressions of hunger and extreme violence against the migrants, who were often imagined by the locals as a horde of clandestine conquering Europe, were contrasted by Jacopo's disappointed looks. In response to Mario's comments, Jacopo said, 'Chatting and chatting. All these words go to the wind.' The expression 'words going to the wind' stands for 'useless talk'. It indicates words that gets lost in the air, because they have been pronounced superficially.<sup>97</sup> For Jacopo, 'no one [among the locals] wants to see the present', because 'there is such a degree of ignorance', and criticizing others is much easier than dealing with the causes of unpleasant events. 'In both fantasies of violence and acts of violence, the focus on the scapegoat becomes so intense that one is unable to reconsider whether or not the object of one's hate is the actual cause of one's misfortune' (Jackson 2005: 78). Regardless of the

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95 I here refer to Lampedusa as "virgin land" following the use of many Lampedusani using the expression to stress the fertility of the island until the development of tourism both in terms of vegetation and sea-life.

96 The use of the adjective 'virgin' in reference to the land brings us back to Billeci's image of the best friend (the foreigner, or the other other), cheating with one's wife (the intimate other) or the land, feminine in both cases. The femininity of the land, imagined as motherland, and associated with being fertile, virgin, and in peril of external enemies, so in need of protection, suggests that many male locals developed a masculine sense of protection and possession over what they perceived as their own (Mookherjee 2008).

97 There is a similar expression in Italian 'dare fiato alla bocca' ('to give breath to one's mouth').

evidence defining the scapegoat as the fundamental cause of trouble in a community, people tend to unite in unfortunate moments, or situations of great struggle, against a common enemy, so that the community becomes strong again by the act of transferring a communal negative feeling into the figure of the scapegoat (Girard 1977). Migrants were turned into easy targets to blame and addressed through a violent language. However, as Jacopo complained, ‘outside our houses it’s full of rubbish, and we waste time talking about what others should do.’ Most locals fell in the habit, understandably so, of complaining, but their lament, was a circular and fairly unproductive act, which functioned on the basis of blaming others, while it failed to criticize oneself, and to find alternative strategies to cope with problems. Sanitation workers who strike because they were regularly unpaid for several months, high bills for an often-insufficient water supply, and the difficulties of everyday life lamented by many Lampedusani, were the consequence of dysfunctional politics (See Chapter 2). Nevertheless, many among the elders thought that ‘the big heads will never change’, because ‘the powerful will play their games’, and anyway, ‘If you put two Lampedusani together, one will say the opposite of the other.’ Such diffused distrust in change and apparent disagreement among locals, unified the many in their attempt at creating a distance between themselves and the migrants. The belief that migrants may take possession of the island and threaten locals’ identity, was a way to objectify their everyday problems, their fears to lose their land, their houses, or their job, within a very precarious economy on the island. As Jackson (2005) writes, the tendency to objectify one’s fear into a person or a group of persons, commonly referred to as scapegoating, is a human attempt to externalize an internal pain into someone else. The scapegoat cannot be someone who has nothing to share with us. ‘We therefore seek another who, though familiar, is foreign, and though one of us can also be said to be not of us.’ (Jackson 2005: 45). The interplay of intimacy-cum-foreignness is a fundamental trait of how the figure of the scapegoat comes to be. As Girard (1977) remarks, for the community to unite in sacrificing a scapegoat, this must be perceived as close yet foreign. The migrant seems to be an ideal candidate for many locals. Migrants leave from the Northern shores of Africa and travel through the Mediterranean Sea. Same sea which is the place of work and life for the fishermen. On the island of Lampedusa, locals and migrants share spaces but usually keep a distance from each other. They occupy different spaces and mostly have no verbal or physical interaction. However, on the island of Lampedusa, the wind blows unhindered from all directions, because the land is flat and exposed due to its morphology and geographical location. The constant blowing of the wind from different directions can be associated to the cane or flag-like features of some Lampedusani, whose attitudes resembled those of the foreigners who came profiting from the island. But the wind also brings what is out inside, having no fixed borders or boundaries. When the wind came from the South and pulled towards Lampedusa, there were more chances for the fishermen to catch migrants’ corpses in their

fishing nets. As Eritrean artist Dagmawi Yimer (2016) stated in his documentary film, the bodies of dead migrants in the Mediterranean did not disappear, but they ‘screamed’ for acknowledgment. Their screams, he writes, would be heard. The last section examines the extent to which migrants’ death at sea had an impact on locals who lived in Lampedusa in the past decades.

### The ethical question of anthropophagy

Out of the shores of Lampedusa, and through the Mediterranean space ranging from the Sicilian island until the northern coasts of Libya, as well as Spain, Tunisia, Turkey and Greece, 3139 persons undertaking a journey on board unseaworthy vessels have died only in 2017 (Report UNHCR 2018). The independent blog Fortress Europe, one of the most authoritative sources documenting the death of migrants in the Mediterranean, shows that from 1988 to 2 February 2016, 17382 persons have died in the attempt to reach Europe (Fortress Europe 2016). The number is just approximate as many accidents at sea have likely not been reported for either missing persons or shipwrecks of which there is no record. These catastrophic situations, where a large number of people die at sea, as it happened in Satun, the southernmost province of the western coast of Thailand, hit by the tsunami of 26 December 2004, can have a drastic impact on locals’ *lifeworlds*. As Merli (2005) argues, the death of people at sea due to catastrophic/tragic events, can reverse people’s ordinary relationship with their primary source of subsistence: fish. In Satun ‘The fish and seafood industry collapsed’ and as a female respondent told her that “People used to eat fish, but now fish eat people” (Merli 2005:157).

This ‘reversal of both the natural and cultural orders’ analysed by Merli (2005: 157) determined a particular situation where ‘potentially, eating fish became an act of indirect anthropophagy<sup>98</sup>.’ In a similar way fish, one of the prerogative resources of Lampedusani, became a taboo for many locals through the years, and in particular among fishermen. However, in Lampedusa, the fish market did not close, and the fish industry kept booming despite all locals’ preoccupations, which were rarely manifested and more often kept for themselves. In the light of it, this subsection ultimately deals with the visceral response that locals have to the fear of anthropophagy. It leaves open the ethical question of the limits within which the recognition of migrants as human beings takes place among many locals in Lampedusa.

When I asked the reason, of some locals’ fear to eat fish, Vincenzo told me that some creatures of the sea, the octopus especially, tend to eat anything they find. The octopus, for example, grabs on limbs, skulls, and any other part of a human body, in order to feed itself. During many of the shipwrecks he witnessed in the late 1990s, Vincenzo saw an octopus ‘Hanging right there, on the

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<sup>98</sup> Anthropophagy, from Greek *anthrōpophagia*, is the consumption of human flesh by human beings

head, can you imagine?’. He told me that most of the policemen and random people who were there to help out, stepped back in disgust. Many stopped eating fish for some time. While some in Lampedusa tried to dismiss the topic, claiming that those stories were all made up – partially because the conversation disturbed them and probably because it could be damaging on both fishing and tourism – others confirmed it, and still now try to avoid eating fish, octopus in particular.

Some locals’ reluctance to speak about the effects that the death of undocumented migrants has had on fish eating in Lampedusa suggests that the capability to “be fed by others’ misfortunate existence” takes place under a condition: migrants are kept at a certain (emotional) distance by the locals. As stated by Merli and Buck (2015: 12) ‘The politics of life conduct or the conduct of life is no longer at the centre of governmental control, but the conduct of/in death.’ As a result, governments have shown an almost obsessive ‘concern regarding an imperceptible sense of “identity contamination” that could emerge from mixing’ Western bodies with “other” bodies. Following mass-disaster events, ‘different epistemologies and disciplinary practices are used both to govern and produce different populations’ (Miriam Ticktin 2011, in Merli and Buch 2015: 12), and failed to equally operate on the identification process of the victims. If ‘the identification process can be seen as a victory over a lost war (Ibid. 2015: 15), migrants drowning in the Mediterranean waters have mostly failed in their ultimate war. The identification process on their bodies is often abandoned to a bureaucratically entangled system, and their beloved ones still cry for their bodies to be recognized and sent back to their countries (Chapter II). Locals often maintain a distance from such issues. They avoid talking about migrants’ deaths, and if they do so, they do it quickly and change topic. Their physical and intimate distance from migrants’ life and especially from their death, must be preserved. When the interaction with migrants becomes internal and concerns the stomach, – an intimate space – people seem to feel a strong sense of repulsion towards the sole idea of eating migrants’ flesh. Doing *mancia mancia* at the expenses of others’ lives is admissible for the many who take profit out of the business of migration as long as these other lives are kept at a certain distance from their inner space. As dead bodies would be able to communicate loudly despite their absence of sound, migrants in their corporeality of dead beings reminded to many locals of their suffering. In Lampedusa’s past decades, the encounter with living migrants often was not enough to recognize their identity, their histories, and their agency. Despite many in Lampedusa did know a lot about migrants’ stories of abuse, suffering, torture, and of the inappropriate ways in which they had been detained in the CPSA (See Chapter II and III), they often pretended not to. Hearing about their stories from some friend, a researcher, or even by themselves, is often not enough to contrast the force of self-interest. However, when people begin feeling a threat to their internal space, things seem to change. Confronted with migrants’ corpses, the Lampedusani I spoke to ultimately had to face the sickening reality that rests

upon the paradigm of the ‘interest of the day.’ By refusing to eat fish, locals expressed for the very first time a real acknowledgment of migrants as human beings.

## Conclusion

The analysis of some locals’ stories dealing with the present and past time on the island of Lampedusa reveals that Lampedusani’s *lifeworld* dramatically changed through the decades: from times of survival, where people were poor of material goods and had to struggle for subsistence, to the recent years of wealth, abundance and progress. The recent life conditions in Lampedusa fostered locals’ preoccupation and were cause of a growing sense of individuality, mistrust, and suspicion towards others: Lampedusani, Italian tourists, and undocumented migrants. If the lack of resources once created a context in which people had to reciprocally share what they had and endure for subsistence, as the logics of profit spread across the population, the interpersonal relationships among locals changed. The community began to disintegrate, and a sense of individualism developed among the locals. Self-interest was expressed in the terms of a closure towards others, both inside and outside the community. Locals felt cheated by cunning entrepreneurs who bought land and properties on the island and made profit out of it. For elders like Jacopo, it was an outrage, but they could do nothing at that time, because they were ‘poor of experience’ and knew very little about profit and tourism. With time, locals developed an inherent preoccupation for losing what they owned, and a growing distrust towards whoever could potentially represent a threat for their possessions and sources of income. As public discourse on ‘filthy, lazy, and contagious’ migrants grew in the decades (Gatta 2012) and the island officially turned into the “gateway” to Europe for clandestine migration (De Michelis 2017), locals learnt how to take advantage of the situation. Tourism and the business of migration would become their primary source of subsistence.

Many locals feared that if they showed sympathy towards the migrants, they could lose what they had, just as it happened many decades earlier, with entrepreneurs and tourists who took advantage of the island’s resources. Furthermore, the inhabitants of Lampedusa feared that they could be legally persecuted for helping the migrants, as it happened in the past, when fishermen were accused of smuggling undocumented migrants, and their boats were sequestered. In those occasions, entire families’ income was threatened. If we deploy the image used by the old Billeci, were they not going to protect themselves from the potential dangers that the world of profit brought to Lampedusa, locals’ ‘flesh would have been eaten.’ In the light of it, many Lampedusani preoccupied themselves on “filling their stomachs” (taking advantage from the business of migration), regardless of the outcomes that the industry of illegality has had on migrants’ lives.



I must clarify that in Lampedusa, a portion of locals has greatly contributed to fighting the business of undocumented migration from within. Some have battled for years to legally adopt the younger migrants. Many regularly provide every kind of primary resource (from food to clothes and bed sheets) to the Church, where nun Adelaide<sup>99</sup> collects them and gives them to the migrants, doing the job in which the CPSA often fails. There are tourists who have permanently moved to live on the island of Lampedusa, to fight their battle against indifference, self-interest, and profit. However, as I have described, many others have responded differently to violence, injustice, and the malfunctioning of the system of undocumented migration.

The various behaviours of Lampedusani must be inscribed within the mutable context of the borderland Lampedusa, where some of those who claimed that migrants should have been dispelled from the island as we chatted at a café, revealed in other moments very different facets of their personalities. They had helped migrants from drowning at sea and retrieved dead bodies, caught in their fishing nets. Some stopped fishing for months, either because their fishing boats were sequestered by the Coast Guard, or for personal difficulties caused by the traumatic encounters with horrific scenes of rotten bodies (De Michelis 2017; 9). Locals' fear towards fish eating was a matter of shame for the many in Lampedusa. They preferred to keep silent. By avoiding talking about it, many hoped that they could put the issue aside, leaving it to the Mediterranean Sea, submerged. Perhaps then, tourists could keep coming to Lampedusa, Lampedusa would not be known once again as port of migrants' death, and journalists and researchers would ultimately stop bothering locals, asking irritating questions about the migrants and the hot topic of undocumented migration.

Vincenzo's description of the common horrific feeling towards the sole idea of eating migrants' flesh via fish consumption was certainly a form of recognition of the humanity of dead migrants. However, one may argue that the recognition of migrants' humanity has never been an issue for the Lampedusani. Locals have tried to move on in life, to progress for themselves and their families, following what they considered to be the best and most convenient way (Arendt 1958). They had turned old barracks into fish restaurants, clubs, cafés, bars, and renting offices for scooters, cars, and boats. They have tried to take advantage of the system of immigration and the industry of tourism, which previously took advantage of them, 'poor of experience', as Jacopo claimed, but rich of the will to progress, that is common to all men, as Billeci remarked. If we read the ethnographic material from this perspective, the answer to the provocation of Dagmawi Yimer's (2016) short documentary is the following: the voices of the dead and unidentified migrants in the Mediterranean keep haunting the shores of Lampedusa, but locals mostly try to place a distance between themselves and the

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99 In 2016-2017, nun Adelaide used to collect the food and clothes offered by the community of Lampedusani and donors from outside the island, and bring them to the CPSA, or distribute them to the migrants who came to Church during the day.

acknowledgment of migrants' death. Otherwise, theirs would become an unbearable existence, where the hunch of feeding oneself by the consumption of others' flesh will turn into a daily nightmare.

The reference to anthropophagy is a paradox of the threshold between the space in which taking advantage of someone else is acceptable and the moment where such hunger for other's flesh becomes horrific and requires one's stomach to stop eating. It provides a direction for the analysis of the next chapter, that I wish to explore by moving into a different space, the CPSA. The CPSA is an ambiguous space, in the sense that is both external, because isolated from the centre of Lampedusa and non-accessible to those who are not authorized, and internal, because it allows for spaces of intimacy and proximity between migration workers and migrants.

Within the space of clandestine migration, workers are forced to obedience but yet find spaces of thinking and acting outside the rules. Their proximity with migrants, the time they spend together, the stories they are told, the moments of suffering and joy they come across, determine spaces of contact. The use of migrants for the ends of the industry of illegality through which they are literally 'brought (to land) alive' is made clear through the practices of detention and surveillance regulating life in the temporary Stay Centres. However, as Alex Hall (2014) argues, ethnography shows that within such non-spaces, where non-persons are legally and politically formed, life carries on. As people live their lives, ethics, that I here understand as the substance of acting upon one's sense of obedience, and one's sense of good, can be explored through migration workers intertwined and at times unresolvable dilemmas.

## Chapter V Small gestures at the CPSA

You can hear the ambulance sirens in the night. Amongst dogs barking in the distance and air conditioning blowing rapidly on the hot and humid end-of-August air, a flashing police car storms along the dim streets of the island, heading, I believe, towards the CPSA. In the meantime, loads of people are eating ice cream, dancing, looking for somewhere to have an aperitif, chatting happily under the bright stars of Lampedusa island. In the meantime, 1273 migrants are being disembarked on the island.

Landings began at eight in the evening roughly and ended in the middle of the night. Inside the CPSA, some of the migration workers worked until the following morning. The next evening, Silvio would say that ‘horrible things happened’ the previous night. The Egyptian cultural mediator told me that Save the Children’s members decided to leave the CPSA at 3 am, ‘during the emergency’, he said, reluctantly. Barbara, one of the migration workers of Save the Children, reported an ‘irregularity’ attributed to Rossana, the director of the CPSA, because migrants received their food only after a long delay<sup>100</sup>. An emergency within the state of emergency broke on the island, and as it happened, the usual order of things was once again suspended, reshuffled, and called into question. ‘During the night, Masella [the Minister of Home Affairs in 2016] shouted to a police officer, with her strong voice’, said Silvio. The Minister of Home Affairs was in Lampedusa for a temporary regular check at the CPSA. The argument with the police broke because police agents were not collaborating to help the *ospiti* [guests]<sup>101</sup>, while Masella, as Silvio explained, ‘was there distributing food and taking care of the migrants.’ Silvio wanted to be specific about the careless behaviour of some migration workers during that exceptional circumstance. ‘You know what?’, Silvio said. ‘I was reported by Save the Children for engaging in an activity which did not concern me.’ The cultural mediator of Save the Children referred to the fact that he had been distributing food and helping out migration workers that night, like the Masella and most migration workers. For Silvio, ‘It’s a matter of humanness. You do it because it is humane’ (Fieldnotes 30/08/16).

Based on the above ethnographic account, in the following chapter, I aim to evaluate the limits between the fleeting moments that occur between migrants and migration workers within the space of the CPSA, and the structural difficulties or emotional outcomes concerning all migration workers who attempt to move across, around, or through the rigid practices of exclusion upon which the CPSA rests. The chapter moves across the following questions: if locals mostly show a shared sense of fear

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100 The Hotspot of Lampedusa could host roughly three hundred people, and part of the dorms had been given fire to by some Tunisian migrants in protest during May 2016. On that night, 1273 migrants landed, and a few hundred people were already inside the CPSA.

101 The term *ospite* (guest) is used in bureaucratic language to refer to undocumented migrants detained in Hotspots and Welcoming centers in Italy. The term is commonly used by migration workers to call or refer to the migrants inside the CPSA. I will use it throughout the chapter to preserve the Italian term and the sense of irony of using the word to refer to undocumented migrants detained inside the CPSA of Lampedusa.

and a necessity to keep a certain emotional distance towards undocumented migrants (although they have fairly peacefully co-habited on the island during the past decades), what kinds of responses do migration workers have towards the migrants with whom they daily work at the CPSA? If on the one hand the reduced interaction with the migrants has contributed to some locals' closure towards the newcomers, is it possible that within the CPSA human relationships may be forged, developed, and strengthened among migrants and migration workers? Small gestures are those which do not appear immediately as extraordinary, and which, if considered with the practices of a detention centre like the CPSA (where the pain, suffering, and tiredness of the many migrants reveal themselves to migration workers), can acquire a fundamental role.

This chapter thus examines humanness as a quality which can emerge in gestures and speech in the apparently least favourable contexts, namely the CPSA of Lampedusa. Metaphorically, given the particular space of the camp, these moments of care can be regarded as gifts, although only on intermittent and very limited occasions. The Ancient Greek term for gift is "*dosis*". The term both refers to something which is well received but also to a threat (Pavanello 2007). Thus, the gift, which is one of the first expressions of human relationships studied by anthropologists (Malinowski 1961; Mauss 1990; Davis 1976), is both symbol of humanness and omen of death, as the story of the Trojan horse narrated in the Iliad suggests. Gift-giving is a simple yet very insidious process, which will somehow establish a connection between giver and receiver. The outcomes, however, are not always predictable, and the intentions of what one does will not necessarily correspond to what one will receive. In the context of the CPSA, to give can take multiple forms, and lead to unexpected outcomes. It can be poisonous in a sense — it can expose the giver to pain and cause emotional wounds, which I will call "emotional scars" — but it can also reciprocate memorable feelings which turn into the fuel of one's actions, sense of responsibility, and willingness to transform the reality of the CPSA in Lampedusa. In light of it, this chapter will explore the ethnographic spaces where pain is manifested, shared, and transformed through what we may imagine as a reciprocal healing process between the migrants and the migration workers. If the mainstream debates on undocumented migration throw up images of migration workers as authoritative figures who rescue the migrants while safeguarding the European borders (Andersson 2014), the experiences of these men and women inside the CPSA of Lampedusa reveal their vulnerabilities, uncertainties, ethical struggles, and capacities to heal the migrants, and to be healed by them.

## Breaching the paradigm of the camp

Considering that most journalists and researchers were not allowed to enter the CPSA during 2016 and 2017, perhaps to preserve it from the scandals or question its efficiency as it happened in the past<sup>102</sup>, we currently have a very limited ethnographic account of everyday life inside the CPSA of Lampedusa. As I argued in Chapter II, the Hotspot of Lampedusa structurally projects the paradigm of the camp, because its juridical existence and structure rests upon the normalization of the state of exception or state of emergency, publicly and politically reiterated in the past decades. Thus, most anthropological work on migrants' detention centres rely on Agamben's (2003) paradigm of the 'camp.' Following Agamben's work, the CPSA of Lampedusa can be theorized as an 'abject space' where the most fundamental and violent separation — between bare life and political life (rights, and protections) — applies on migrants' bodies, transforming their human life into a not fully human one (See Edkins 2007). Agamben's (2003) paradigm of the camp thus depicts the detention centre as a realm of separateness, where inclusion can only exist as a form of exclusion of bare life (undocumented migrants), and where the biopolitical power of the state is by default enforced as a result of a system of surveillance which strips people of their political rights via practices of exclusion.

The paradigm of the 'camp' emerges ethnographically in the work of Gatti (2005), an Italian investigative journalist who entered the CPSA in Lampedusa undercover. He was detained inside the CPSA for a week, before being recognized and expelled from the detention centre. Gatti (2005) described the 'humiliations, abuses, violence and everything else that Italy has always kept secret from the inspections of the European Parliament and the United Nations.' He wrote extensively of his experience as a living witness of the critically dysfunctional, abusive, and violent system of detention on hold in Lampedusa at that time. A growing divide between the figure of the migration workers and that of the undocumented migrants grew in critical and academic writing as a result, and the detention centre of Lampedusa has become a paradigm of migrants' exclusion, categorization, and inhumane treatment.

My premise in this chapter is that further investigation needs to be carried out in writing about the unprofessional, unethical, inhumane, unjust, and publicly invisible situations taking place inside the CPSA in Lampedusa, as well as many other 'detention centres' in Italy and Europe, shedding light on what difficulties migrants have to face daily. In the previous chapters I attempted to do so, at least in a minor detail, by providing migrants' experiences of injustice and violence. This chapter begins by reinforcing Agamben's argument of detention centres as 'camps' where the exclusion upon

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102 Investigative journalist Fabrizio Gatti (2005) reported the inhumane conditions experienced by the migrants detained inside the CPSA of Lampedusa thanks to his weekly undercover life as a Kurd migrant inside the Hotspot in 2007. Also, In December 2013 images of naked migrants queuing in the cold waiting for anti-scabies cold showers were broadcasted on TV and via the social media in Italy (Corriere della Sera 2013).

which the political power rests is rendered invisible to the knowledge of most people through migration workers' testimonies of everyday life inside the Hotspot. Instead of focusing on migrants' testimonies, it will consider some migration workers' accounts of particularly telling events and everyday life at the CPSA, to both unravel the structural downfalls, malfunctioning, and unprofessionalism of the system, and the impact that such situations have on detainees and workers. On the one hand, Agamben's paradigm is quite well surmised by the behaviour of some migration workers who treat the migrants as nothing more than objects of work, showing no compassion or will to overcome the orders in favour of migrants' needs. On the other hand, some migration workers resist the system. By suspending the norms for what they recall as primary necessities (migrants' basic needs) — showing their playfulness, care, patience, will to listen, give affect and be present — migration workers' narratives shed light on other fairly unexplored corners of life in detention centres. Their words will further suggest that if one aims at understanding the mechanisms regulating the irregularities of the CPSA in Lampedusa, one must reflect upon the situations where exclusion is determined, but also those where inclusion is possible.

In anthropology, borders have been often regarded as abject spaces, zones of exclusion and separation. The border can delimit the threshold between legal and illegal, internal and external, life and death (De Genova 2002). Borders are nevertheless performative; they 'not only separate, they also imply relations.' (Green 2010:162). But what kinds of relations do people who inhabit or migrate to borderlands establish? In what ways do borders provide an ideal space to determine separation, from locals to migrants, or to imply relations, experiences of abandonment? As Navaro-Yashin shows in her work on affective space in Cyprus, although there is a constant tension between ego and the abject (Kristeva 1982), the 'abject' can also be 'in one's vicinity, environment, and domestic space (Navaro-Yashin 2009: 6). If according to Navaro-Yashin when the 'abject' becomes embedded in one's intimate sense of identity, melancholia emerges through people's life stories, what else can an intimate experience of the 'abject' determine?

What still needs further ethnographic attention, I will argue, is an observation of how people who are directly involved in the practices of the CPSA act, interact, and make sense of the very system which they are called to enforce or accept. As Alex Hall (2014: 69) remarks, anthropological literature hardly proposed 'a nuanced view of detention as a space of sociality, of politics and resistance, and of moral possibility.' Further, spaces of detention like the CPSA in Lampedusa have been often imagined as ideal fields for understanding differences, rather than looking for what people might have shared and be willing to share. The camp has been viewed through the lens of pain and suffering, critically engaging with the silent mechanisms through which the sovereign power operates on people's lives, but often as a result determining fixed categories — the bare life, the political life, the

illegal immigrant and the legal citizen. Pain and suffering, however, are transient elements; they can be communicated and to various extent they can be shared, expressed to some and received by others.<sup>103</sup>

If touching someone's pain is a possibility of sharing and an expression of humanness which instead of operating through the sovereign language of the 'outsider', reversely moves inwards, finding other ways of being in relation to the other, what does it entail for both migrant workers and migrants? The following sections will unravel the often-unspoken individual accounts of migration workers whose wish to help and contribute to migrants' wellbeing can exceed fixed rules and reconstitute the social space inside the CPSA. As Hall (2014:70) argues, 'the possibility of...this fragile moral response between officers and detainees' to whom I refer as migration workers and migrants, 'is cosmopolitan in character, or else folded into a response that has mutuality and vulnerability at its core.' (Ibid. 70). The space of the camp, or the CPSA, can determine particular situations fostering exclusion of the migrants, influencing but never completely determining how migration workers and migrants attend to one another's needs. In light of it, in the following sections I will unravel how the daily choices, small acts, and ephemeral gestures of migrant workers at the CPSA can generate exciting forms of reciprocity: a reciprocity which rests upon the basis of a way of life which resists profit and endures in the struggle of *being in* and *with* the world. I will also explore migrants and migration workers' spaces of mutuality as the most emotionally challenging but also rewarding experiences of encounter that take place in a space which stood as a symbol contrary to such experiences.

### 'What can we do?' Responsibility at the CPSA

The landing of 1273 people in August 2016 created a great chaos at the CPSA, and some doctors and migration workers argued about the unprofessional management of the *ospiti*. Selene was a paediatrician working for INMP<sup>104</sup> since the beginning of 2016. For her, the scene of mothers and children, adults and very young people crowded on the floor on the morning following the landing of 1273 migrants, 'with a smell of not having washed one's body for days, the tiredness of the journey, the beatings, the waves and the waiting' was not new. However, injustice made her feel unwell and

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103 When Veena Das discusses (2007) about the meaning of the expressibility and alienability of pain, she refers to the question of what being in pain means in relation to two major points highlighted by Wittgenstein's thesis. One is that the expression of one's pain is the beginning of the language, hence the possibility for the other person who is not in pain to surmise what someone's complaint means. The second being that pain can be felt into another's body, and therefore that sharing pain is a possibility for the communicability of such experience, and the attempt to give voice to people by touching – sharing something with them.

104 Istituto Nazionale per la promozione della salute delle popolazioni Migranti per il contrasto delle malattie della Povertà (National Institute for promoting the health of Migrants' populations and for contrasting Poverty related diseases).

tired. She confessed to me that she had lost most of her positive spirit. Like many other migration workers whom I had met, Selene was getting used to the system on the island and surrendering to it:

‘Yeah’, she would say, ‘Because there are far too many wrong situations here. There is bad management, lack of responsibility, lack of interest. Ultimately, everyone, literally everyone, sees without moving a finger, knows without saying a word, can do something, but feels tired about it. It’s the same story: “what can we do? Things will always be like this. By doing so, people let go, they give up, and everything keeps going as usual. Outside the island’ Selene carried on, ‘in a similar working context, a wrong diagnosis or a faulty medical intervention would be severely punished and the consequences could be devastating for the workers. But here it is different, nobody really checks what is going on, and you do what the fuck you want to. We work with non-persons.’

The Hotspot of Lampedusa appeared as the end result of a ‘bureaucratic organization with its seductively transcendent and ordered procedures’ which ultimately determines a ‘floating responsibility’ (Hall 2014:79) where ‘no one can reasonably and convincingly claim (or be charged with) the “authorship” of (of the responsibility for) the end result’ (Bauman 1993: 18). In the words of Hall, partly quoting Isin and Rygiel 2007, ‘The detention centre’ has become a space where it is possible to treat the detainees ‘neither as subjects (of discipline) nor objects (of elimination) but as those without presence, without existence, as inexistent’ (Isin and Rygiel 2007: 184). Further than that, *ospiti* keep coming to the CPSA of Lampedusa, justifying the presence of migration workers and the Hotspot, but their well-being is subjected to widespread unprofessionalism and lack of care.

Through her words, Selene described an arbitrary mechanism of non-responsibility, which first rests on the absence of severe repercussions due to working errors, and as a consequence on the way in which *ospiti* are perceived as ‘non-persons,’ as those for whom it is possible to do or not do, to act well or badly, according to one’s discretion. The CPSA acquires in this sense the character of an ‘abject space’, where migrants are treated as other than any regular citizen, with reduced rights and protections (Augé, 1992; Hall 2014). From a medical-legal perspective, migrants are regarded as less important than other patients elsewhere in Italy. Their condition resembles Agamben’s paradigm of the *homo sacer*, the one who can be killed as a consequence of a wrong diagnosis, or a faulty medical intervention, without punishment.

The exclusion of undocumented migrants from the political-legal life to which legal citizens have access is primarily founded on the rationale upon which the Hotspot was planned and enforced in Lampedusa in the first place, namely, that ‘detention for illegal immigrants and asylum seekers, as well as people deemed threats to national security, is justified as a measure to order, contain and



control undesirable and threatening mobilities' (Hall 2014:70). However, as Selene reveals, the discretionary power to report an accident, deal with medical errors of colleagues, or archive accidents which have or could have put migrants' life at risk, ultimately determines the 'the danger... and the ability to suspend normal law in the name of national security' (Ibid. 70). Such danger is for the paediatrician fundamentally related to people's lack of responsibility. Responsibility is a crucial concept here. For Selene, being responsible as a paediatrician, a nurse, a police agent, or a simple worker inside the CPSA, is to address 'wrong situations', to show interest in migrants' present and future situations, and to intervene as much as one can. Responsibility entails maintaining a positive attitude, and each time recognizing the *ospiti* as persons with needs, anxieties, frustrations, hopes, regardless of the malfunctioning of the system, regardless of the fear of punishment at work, of being reported, or losing one's job. Responsibility is for Selene an intent to act for change, a way of being which acknowledges other's needs and moves forward rather than passively giving up, holding on the belief that 'nothing can be done.'

Selene continued our conversation by saying that 'If you feel like doing something good, something which goes beyond your work, you do it, because you need that caress, that glance, that gesture which you'll keep in your heart, and will make you feel important, and will allow you to tell a story, and to remember them (the migrants). But, if you have free time and you don't feel the need to be with them, you won't do it. This is the mechanism, and this is what happens here.' Through her own experience, Selene uncovers the essential egoistic character often arising from working at the CPSA, where people can behave either as acting subjects seeking a gesture of comfort and a way to give purpose to their presence there, or as indifferent beings, too busy caring about their own business rather than being attentive to what is happening to the *guests*.

An interesting issue arising from her words concerns the space of arbitrariness as responsible for enforcing the sovereign power of exclusion against the migrants. The regulation of *guests* inside the CPSA is generally considered by many migration workers as unprofessional, arbitrary, and unjust. Their responses to the very procedures, rules, and orders can work against the paradigm of the camp, showing that within the politics of exception, detention may provide the space where the labels attached to the *guests* are questioned. The next section will describe how the space of the camp opens up possibilities to explore ethics as it raises in exceptional and everyday moments, gestures, and choices. Ethics, I will state, emerges experientially from a spectrum ranging from caring intersubjectivity to careless individualism.

## Ethical responses

The dysfunctional structure of the system of responsibility and forms of self-regulation inside the CPSA, makes it a complex working environment. Its complexity becomes more evident through migration workers' stories inside the CPSA. The episode I will refer to comes from a story I heard from Jacopo, doctor hired by Misericordia di Capo Rizzuto.

Jacopo expressed his personal perspective of working for Misericordia di Capo Rizzuto, by referring to an episode that took place some months earlier following a migrant landing. 'Being the only doctor is not easy, especially in a centre with an effective capacity of three hundred persons. For each landing, the doctor must visit all *ospiti*, one by one, and despite the fact that they already went through the screening process on the boats and at their arrival in Lampedusa, they must be checked very thoroughly, as that would be the last and ultimate medical check.' He told me that after one landing, despite the fact that medical checks had started at ten in the morning, they were prolonged for about five hours. At times, doctors were forced to visit five hundred to more than a thousand *ospiti* with basically no stop, taking fifteen to twenty hours with some short breaks. It is important to keep in mind that Misericordia di Capo Rizzuto guarantees the presence of one doctor, usually helped by a couple of cultural mediators, the psychologist, and one or two nurses. Jacopo told me that during the landing he was telling me about, roughly two hundred people had to wait at the entry gate, under the strong sun of August. According to the praxis of migration workers who work at the CPSA, migrants are not allowed to be given anything to drink or eat before their medical check and identification process has been completed. As a consequence, many people, among whom were women and children, had to wait for hours, exhausted from their journey at sea, dehydrated, with no food or drink. 'So, I really got mad! It's not my duty, I'm the doctor, so it's not my duty, fuck, but I went to take some tanks of water, and I brought them to the spot. Then I started distributing them, one by one. Fuck, and I'm the doctor! The migrant workers stood there, watching. They stared at the migrants. For them what they were seeing wasn't a problem. When I gave them water, they said, "Come on, you know we can't!" I told them that I didn't care about what could or could not be done! If it can't be done, someone would have to come and tell me face to face!' Jacopo was clearly impatient and embittered by what he was telling me, by the lack of interest of many migration workers, and by the acceptance of what he himself had to change. He didn't care what was or was not forbidden to do on the CPSA, and he was ready to take all responsibility for giving water to some hundreds of dehydrated people, he explained. 'To them [other migration workers] it's just all about money. Most of them don't care about anyone.'

Jacopo's account helps us to consider the ordinary practices of treating migrants once they enter the CPSA, and the extent to which applying the rules and following pre-determined procedures 'encourages a view of them as mere objects to be processed' (Hall 2014: 79). The episode of the dehydrated migrants uncovers the outcomes of the CPSA model, where detainees 'ideally become silent, invisible and 'nonexistent' (Ibid. 79). The normalization of limit situations among many migration workers, where hundreds of men, women, and children can stand still or rest on the floor at the entrance of the CPSA, in need of water, food, clean clothes, and some proper rest, further confirms that the CPSA, as other welcoming centres in Italy and Europe, 'is a place where there is a constant social investment in distance and difference' (Ibid. 79).

Nevertheless, moving against many other migration workers, who stood still in front of dehydrated persons waiting for the identification procedures to take place, Jacopo acted outside of the rules, which he found unsound in that particular circumstance, because the need to intervene helping the migrants came first and put on hold whatever order was in place before. In this sense, the *necessitas* upon which the exception rests in Agamben's (2003) paradigm of exclusion, turns into a possibility to subvert categories, break boundaries and give back some humanity to the migrants, otherwise treated as right-less subjects, as non-persons.

An understanding of Jacopo's actions might be found in what Jackson refers to as the principle of non-belonging, which leads some to act differently from many others when faced with a situation that is felt as unjust, although generally perceived as normal. Jacopo's remark that migration workers are mostly people who 'don't care about them' [the migrants], by implication, meant that he did care about migrants' wellbeing, his statement reinforced his dissociation from those for whom their job was 'all about money.' Jacopo's ethics emerges in this sense as a form of reaction to a generally normalized situation of detention which he still did not accept. He felt that he had to do something about it, despite doing so might have meant to lose his job. Ethics is in this case a process of acting upon an experience perceived as unjust but does not originate from a previous reading or absolute answer to what is good or evil, right or wrong (Jackson 2013a). It is rather the presentation of the moment where one falls to the temptation of doing something which is commonly regarded as what 'cannot be done'.

For Jacopo, nothing particularly exceptional had happened on that occasion. The story he told me was for him a fairly ordinary one. As he stressed several times during our conversations about the event, his gesture was not heroic in any sense, neither it was exceptionally relevant for the future of the dehydrated migrants. Their life would not change in any respect after Jacopo's intervention. However, his response to migrants' needs opened a space of moral possibility (Hall 2014), where the power of exclusion surrendered to the force of helping someone who is in need. Jacopo's account

tells us that in contexts of detention, where there is a great disparity of power between a group of regulators and one of detainees, arbitrariness can become a possibility of subverting the order which aims to exclude migrants and make them appear to the migration workers as non-persons. Such possibility rests upon migrants and migration workers' everyday responses to particular circumstances. These may not change the structural, legal, and political separation between migrants and migration workers, but they could tell us something important about what they share and what kinds of relationships they can establish within such social hierarchies. In the following section I will turn to examining how these ultimately human relationships emerge as spontaneous, uncertain, and unpredictable, exceeding the otherwise fixed and determinate paradigm of the camp, where exclusion is expected to define how people share spaces, emotions, and moments of their life inside the CPSA.

### The spontaneity of ethics

Jacopo and I were at my place when he first told me about Ismael, a teenage boy from Gambia who landed in Lampedusa with wounds and pustules on his hands and feet, because he had caught infections and got sick during his stay in Libya. Probably, such medical conditions were the result of the time spent in Libyan prisons. He told Jacopo that since he did not have enough money to pay the crossing, smugglers put him at work for about a year. When they realized that his physical condition was of no use for work, they probably decided to let him go into the first available migrant boat to Italy. 'Anyway' Jacopo said, 'Once he reached that point, dead at sea or at land in Libya, what did they care? Bastards!' He then showed me the video of Ismael on his phone, where Roberto, the nurse, made him laugh, telling him random words in Sicilian. Ismael laughed, partly embarrassed, and repeated them. He was filmed sitting on the bed of the ambulatory inside the CPSA, with his bright red hands, playing around with Jacopo and Roberto, a nurse working for Misericordia di Capo Rizzuto, who told him, 'Let's go!'<sup>105</sup> Ismael seemed to nod in the video. His smile could have been interpreted as a sign of consent to what Jacopo was telling him, 'let's go.' When I asked the doctor whether Ismael knew those words, he told me that he did not. Did he not? I asked myself, with a hypothesis I was already formulating on the connection between Jacopo asking him whether he would like to leave the island, and him smiling in consent. 'No way' Jacopo said. 'He smiled because he found our way of talking funny, and because we teased him when he tried to pronounce some words in Sicilian.' Jacopo explained to me that some *ospiti* do not come to the ambulatory as they should. Some just do not come, and when they need medical assistance, he usually goes to them, with Selene and Anthony (an Eritrean cultural mediator), or Vincenzo (a cultural mediator from Lampedusa) to

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<sup>105</sup> 'Andamuninni va!'

actually look after them. With Ismael, he did the same. ‘He never came, never. He stood apart. So, Selene and I looked at each other and said, “Let’s go take him, come on.” And she would say, “Jacopo, you go, go.”’ He made some fun of Selene to then say, ‘We would then go together and tell him, Ismael, come on! And him, yes, yes...’

There is an element of playfulness which permeates Jacopo’s account. In a particularly inhumane context, where ‘detainees... are engaged in various legal struggles to have their experiences of trauma, suffering and persecution recognized, to have their humanity acknowledged’ (Hall 2014: 80), doctors and nurses are expected to carry out their job establishing a minimal personal contact with the *ospiti*. Asking questions which go beyond the ‘competence’ of each migration workers is collectively considered to be inappropriate and dangerous. ‘One could be fired instantly’, Jacopo explained. Helping out by letting a migrant make an international phone call to the family or bringing food from outside the CPSA to cheer up the *ospiti*, is also forbidden and can be reported as ‘irregular behaviour.’ Punishment, as Selene explained, works in a particular form which reiterates the ‘bareness’ of migrants by enforcing practices of exclusion and forbidding migration workers’ attempts to acknowledge the *ospiti* as persons having rights, needs, having a voice and being capable of action and reaction. In consideration of it, playfulness opens up an important possibility of moving around the rigid system of detention enforced inside the CPSA. Playfulness is an important vehicle of intersubjective connections; it can help establishing a relationship between migration workers and *ospiti*, and it further favours medical procedures to be carried out effectively.

Collaboration and playfulness could then drastically influence both migration workers and migrants’ experiences inside the CPSA. In addition to the most celebrated anthropological accounts on migrants’ detention centres, described as spaces where rigor and indifference establish a thick barrier between the guards and the detainees, the CPSA of Lampedusa was partly experienced by some migration workers as a place where personal relationships could still be established. This particular aspect is not found in other ethnographic accounts. Joking and teasing became powerful daily practices of recognizing the migrants as persons rather than reinforcing a system which aims to deem them as non-persons. Playfulness, as I have described, was not about grandiose gestures or extraordinary events, but rather it mostly rested upon small gestures and spontaneity. One may understandably argue on the one hand that migrants do not even understand what kind of game they are engaged in. Most of them experience the CPSA as a transitory and ambiguous space where it is never quite clear what will happen next, when they will be allowed to leave the island, and for how long they will be detained. On the other hand, migrants could sense playfulness, and they actively responded to it. Before exploring this, let me expand on the relation between playfulness and spontaneity.

There is an element of spontaneity which comes through Jacopo's account inside the CPSA; this rests on the willingness to establish personal relationships with the migrants detained at the Hotspot. The jokes of Jacopo, and the playfulness of Selene and Roberto, exceeded working dispositions, and highlighted the care that some migration workers showed towards the migrants. Moments of contact and sharing are much needed by some of the migrants, especially right after landing operations. As Jackson (2013: 22) remarks, 'Thankfully, life confounds and overflows the definitions we impose upon it in the name of reason or administrative control, and it is this excess of meaning, this tendency of life to deny our attempts to bind it with words and ideas, that redeems us'. Joking and teasing within a context like the CPSA became powerful daily practices of recognizing the *ospiti* as persons rather than reinforcing a system which aims to reduce them to non-persons (Ravenda 2012; Hall 2014).

If we were to understand the CPSA literally through Agamben's terms, in fact, migrants and migration workers would be regarded respectively as *homini sacri* and sovereign power perpetrators. But ethnographically, these categories hardly capture the attitudes, gestures, and speech, of people, which often exceed the rigid paradigm of the state of exception (Agamben 2003). In fact, Ismail's smiles and improvement in socializing inside the CPSA both with migration workers and other migrants was not determined by following the regime ordered by the Misericordia di Capo Rizzuto or the INMP, for whom Jacopo, Anthony and Selene worked. Rather, the possibility to establish a personal relationship with Ismail, rested on migration workers' very will or predisposition to transcend the system. In other words, Jacopo's account suggests that the acknowledgment of migrants as human beings does not necessarily require a drastic change of the rules, but rather shows that 'ethical praxis often bypasses or bends rules without necessarily breaking them (Jackson 2013a: 237). As Jackson (Ibid: 237) explains in reference to James Faubion, 'the term "paranomic" (beside or parallel to the law)... is better understood in many practical contexts as a matter of virtuosity — skill in getting around difficulties, playing with possibilities, rather than slavishly following set rules of respecting conventional protocols.' Details can make the difference in how migration workers can reiterate or find ways of bypassing the system in place inside the CPSA. If practices of exclusion rest on often invisible or generally unnoticeable procedures and relationships established to turn the migrants into rightness, a-historical, and apolitical subjects<sup>106</sup> (De Genova 2004; Gatta 2012; Andersson 2014), in a similar way, effective and unnoticeable can be those practices through which migrants and migration workers engage with one another, impacting on each other's feelings, emotions, and vital energy.

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<sup>106</sup> The violence they have suffered to reach Libya, the pain of living in connection houses, and the deadly journey on unseaworthy boats to Europe, initiate the undocumented migrants to their time in 'detention', first in Lampedusa, and then somewhere in Italy or other European countries (Lucht 2011).

## Small gestures can mean the world

Jacopo knew well that his and other colleagues' behaviours could not change what he referred to as the 'system of interest and bloody indifference' upon which the 'business of migration' rested (Andersson 2014). The doctor of the CPSA told me that 'From a global perspective, the system cannot be changed in any way. What is at stake is what happens in the small scale, very small, within the microcosm of the one on one relationships.' He pointed to his chest, then to a hypothetical person in front of him, and then back to himself. 'Things can change through human relationships. This awareness gives me the strength to carry on and to be less negative; the awareness that if the Misericordie in all respects puts us in the position to work badly, on the other hand in small scale there are people who 'work their asses off.' Those people must face shitty working conditions, and for the *ospiti* it is much worse.'

During our conversation, Jacopo showed a keen awareness of the functioning of the power system he was working for. He thought that he could not handle the problems concerning the CPSA by himself. So, he was on the *here and now*, doing what he could to leave a positive memory to both his colleagues and the migrants. Jacopo's approach to the detention system is one of determinate belief in acting within ones' constraints. His approach to his job in Lampedusa reinforces the notion that a small group of people, even one person, may not change the world, but will always make some difference in it.<sup>107</sup>

In conversation with Levinas' (1979) work, Jackson (2013: 9) argues that 'ethics begins in our face-to-face encounters with others and our responsiveness to the other.' Jacopo's account reiterates Jackson's statement and further adds that it is within such personal encounters with migrants, but also with migration workers, that he could find a reason to move forward and keep working in the CPSA. 'Human relationships' thus constituted the basis upon which some migration workers could find alternative ways around the practices of exclusion enforced in the CPSA, and act in those directions.

Debora was a psychologist from Lampedusa in her early thirties, hired by the Misericordia di Capo Rizzuto several years before I came. With Rosalia and Caterina, she worked with migrants of all ages, trying to do her best despite the structural problems which did not allow her to visit patients as a psychologist would otherwise do in a different context. 'Debora, you must know, she is the greatest, and I think she deserves respect and admiration as a person, for the way she behaves towards migrants. It's not about her job. She goes well beyond her duties. Once she organized a birthday party for a twenty year old migrant from The Gambia. She organized it all, and then she called him to the ambulatory to celebrate all together. We weren't many. Debora, Yonas... six in total, but he was so

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<sup>107</sup> I am here drawing from the still debated quote: 'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only that that ever has', which was attributed to Margaret Mead, but also to Donald Keys.

happy... Yes, these are small gestures, perhaps they are for us, they are little things, but for them (the migrants) they can really make the difference, and they can mean the world.'

Considering the life conditions in which undocumented migrants live inside the CPSA, preparing a birthday cake for an *ospite*'s birthday may sound as an insufficient reason for him to feel happy, or even to just feel better. One reasonably may expect that other more urgent problems should be solved first: providing for decent dormitories with clean mattresses, fixing the bathrooms, and let them receive their documents to safely reach Italy or other European countries and begin working. Without a prompt intervention in that sense, migrants will always be 'bare lives', and their humanity will not be acknowledged. Of course, the ones I have mentioned are structural downfalls of a system which Jacopo, Debora, Selene, or Yonas, could not effectively change. However, if one pays attention to Jacopo's account, it becomes clear that the acknowledgment of migrants as persons, is determined by the unprofessionalism and dysfunctional system of the detention centre in Lampedusa, but it does not solely depend on it. Migration workers' attitude towards the *ospiti*, their willingness to establish a contact with them, to get to know them better, to play with them or make them feel special, even if just for the time of a birthday cake, do make the difference inside the Hotspot. From these accounts, it is clear that the enforcement of the paradigm of exclusion on migrants who landed in Lampedusa primarily rested on everyday interactions with migration workers; it lay on the quality of approach, attention, and care which was given and returned inside the CPSA. [Graeber in Jackson (2013: 11)]. For Graeber (2011: 89), 'if we want to understand the moral grounds of economic life, and by extension, human life' we must be attentive to 'the very small things', valuing 'gestures so tiny that we ordinarily never stop to think about them at all.' What Jacopo called 'little things' really challenged the Agambenian perspective of the detention centre, unravelling some everyday details of how people behaved, what relationships they could establish, and how these rose, grew, and changed in time.

Jacopo thought that what they did was not exceptional. If he had to give me a reason for his personal responses to the migrants in the situations he described, Jacopo would think that of the typically welcoming Sicilian attitude towards guests. 'this is our culture. If there's a guest, you welcome the guest, and try to make him or her feel good... You give a football ball and start playing football. Vincenzo sometimes did it with his guitar, Anthony with a ball.'

For Jacopo, the figure of the guest holds a sacred value which does not vary if the guest is an undocumented migrant. Migrants in the CPSA are officially referred to as 'guests'. In practice, the use of the term 'guests' served to underline migrants' temporary permanence, their limbo state from arrival to identification and departure; it also defined their condition of otherness in reference to those whom on the other side are 'welcoming' them. For Jacopo, however, 'guest' meant something totally



different from the bureaucratic use of the term inside the CPSA. Guests are those towards whom we have a responsibility: as a consequence, trying to make migrants feel more at ease while being detained inside the CPSA should be natural to all migration workers. There is an extensive literature on hospitality in the Mediterranean (Pitrè 1913; Schneider 1976; Scheweizer 1988; Heaterrington 2001), which would be worth addressing in such respect, to further explore the paradoxes of the language of politics (Ben-Yehoyada 2015) and the rather spontaneous responses of hospitality that migration workers can have, despite their duties and roles. In this text, I only referred to the notion of hospitality to show that the reality of the CPSA is for a great part the representation of people's willingness to receive political and bureaucratic terms, applying them, or re-invent them to find other meanings and act upon them.

Many migration workers have shown me many videos inside the CPSA. These were of a group of migrants played football with cultural mediators, or a circle of men and women sang and danced together with Rossana, the director, and Debora. On this last occasion, Jacopo played the music from the ambulatory with the help of Vincenzo, while outdoors people celebrated the news they had just received: the following day they would finally be transferred to Sicily. To bring a guitar to work, play football, dance or sing are all expressions of hospitality; practices of treating migrants which undermine or at least create resistance to the practices of subjugation and silence otherwise played out by many other migration workers. *To treat* in this case does not take a negative value<sup>108</sup>: in this case, *to treat ospiti* as such meant for Jacopo to approach them not just as objects of work (Gatta 2006-2007), but as persons to be welcomed, respected and put at ease, as the Sicilian custom would advise to do with a guest (Davis 1973; Block 2002; Schweizer 1988).

Through such stories, and by the ethnographic glance into contexts like Lampedusa, gestures acquire a particularly relevant power, in the sense that they can seriously transform relationships in such a way that the experience of both migration workers and migrants could shift from the spectrum of exclusion, separation and indifference, to the sphere of care, presence and sharing. In a certain sense, migration workers' behaviour may be metaphorically regarded as a form of gift-giving, a way of acknowledging the *ospiti* as persons within a system which exacerbates migrant's isolation from non-migrants. But, what does the making of such small gestures entail for migrant workers? What is at stake for them, and what is there to be gained?

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<sup>108</sup> as Gatta (2012) remarks in his essay on biopolitics in Lampedusa, where he analyses the etymology and multiple use of the term, which in Italian can be used as 'disposing of', 'using', or assuming a position of power towards the subject undertaking the 'treatment.'

## Emotional scars

Gula was a Nigerian teenage boy who entered the CPSA in good physical conditions, but never stopped crying. Yonas, the Eritrean cultural mediator, said that no one seemed to understand why. Together with Jacopo and Roberto, the nurse of the Ambulatorio, he tried to calm down the teenager, and asked what happened. After some time, they finally understood what happened, because Gula made a gesture with his hand. He gestured as if something was slipping away from his fingers. Jacopo and the others realized that he was a survivor from a shipwreck in the Mediterranean, and he was crying from the thought of the people he could not save from the water. Jacopo, Anthony and Roberto tried to understand if a loved person had died during the shipwreck, but what they received was nothing other than the boy's tears. 'That really killed me,' Jacopo declared.

As the above excerpt may suggest, particularly traumatic experiences carried and embodied by some migrants, can importantly expose migration workers to their fragilities. Establishing a human relationship with the *ospiti* can 'kill', it can stab someone's emotional world, penetrating in one's memories, to leave *moral scars*; signs or traces, one could say, of a shared experience which still lives within the memories of migration workers. These accounts of Jacopo are like deadly wounds, produced by establishing an emotional contact with migrants' experiences of pain and suffering. Like a gift which entails the possibility of being poisonous as a threat, the time, care, patience, and willingness that some migration workers gave to the migrants, could be returned as forms of lethal emotions, or moral scars.

Veena Das (2007) has extensively worked on what 'being with no words', remaining silent or losing one's voice mean in contexts of extreme suffering. Enforced displacement, torture, or sexual violence is a devastating experience, to the extent that the re-elaboration of what one has felt often leaves blank spaces which words can hardly fill (Das 2007). If words can be lost and silence can literally become a form of being, a response to suffering and pain, both from the victims and the people who are called to provide aid, words do not necessarily need to be explanatory tools of an event, a state of being, or a silence. They can be rather used to create bridges, connections, holding on a shared will to hear or care for someone. Such care, as the ethnographic excerpt suggests, can profoundly impact on the listener's emotional world as well. Hearing migrants' voice, which entails a gesture without words, like Ismail's repetitive gesture of raising his arm to grasp something imaginary, requires attention to detail, time, but also a predisposition to opening up to others.

At times, migration workers cried in front of each other. It was, they used to tell me, a way of letting go of 'the shitty reality' they were faced with daily, and towards which they mostly felt powerless. Migration workers lived such sense of impossibility to make a change as a frustrating

experience. Doctors were trained to cure patients, operating through the scientific methods of medicine to get the most successful or least damaging result. Inside the CPSA, however, where the *ospiti* suffer loneliness and the outcomes of living in a system of enforced detention, doctors' role is sabotaged, and their utility is threatened. When they gathered in a room, inside the ambulatory, or at night, in their dorms, migration workers began crying, as if others' tears (migrants' expressions of their suffering) were first absorbed to be ultimately expelled out again.

At stake here is a sense of well-being for both migrants and migrant workers. Fiona, the infectious disease specialist of the INMP, told me about the peculiarly difficult working environment at the centre, because it was basically impossible to always keep the doctor's uniform as a form of protection and professional emotional detachment from the patient. For Fiona, wearing the uniform meant to keep a certain distance from the migrants, and although it was often hard to do so, one needed to manage it. Otherwise they could not work at their best and would have been sucked into a hardly bearable emotional vortex. With the image of the uniform and the language of protection used by Fiona, she reveals, together with her colleagues, that being part of a working system like the one of the CPSA, means to find oneself caught between a sense of self protection and a sense of sharing and care towards those who are experiencing a time of struggle.

As Hall (2014) argues, responsibility plays a fundamental role in determining the fragility of migration workers. 'The system of sovereign machinery within which the detainees and officers are caught up, the logic of which they embody and experience, can never efface the ethical possibility of life's contingency, of the difficulty of responsibility (Ibid. 82). Among migration workers there were several ways of dealing with such sense of responsibility towards migrants' fragility, and not everyone felt the same kind of pressure, concern, and moral obligation towards the *ospiti*, as we now know. Care seemed to rise as the key element that could transform emotional scars into nice memories, for both migrants and migration workers.

### A wonderful, powerful hug

Jacopo and I sat on the porch of my house in Lampedusa, right before getting ready to go swimming at the beach. He told me a story about a young migrant (he was about nineteen, he later said) whom he particularly cared about. 'It was my first landing, yeah, the 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2015. They (the migrants) were young, and mostly coming from The Gambia. Fuck, there was one of them who did not talk for two days. He didn't eat. He only went to the toilet. Sometime later I talked to him, to cheer him up... so we talked together... what have you got? tell me, why don't you want to stay with your friends? What about going to play with them or just chat a little? He just wanted to stay inside his room, alone,

alone. Actually, he never really explained what happened to him. He only said that there was an accident, in the desert, I am not sure... and he was in a caravan. Then the caravan capsized and one of his friends died. Stop. And he said they abandoned him there, alone. I think he was dying, or half dead. And I think he kept having this image coming to his mind...'

The guy to whom Jacopo referred was called Samba, and he had experienced the loss of a loved one during his journey to Europe, as many others had.

The doctor noticed that the behaviour of Samba was not usual and tried to do what they could. 'Fuck, I went to see him every time I could. Once per hour, basically, to check on him. I would tell him, listen, are you hungry? How are you? Do you want to eat? Shall I give you a Kinder Bueno?'<sup>109</sup> And he would go like, "no no no." He didn't eat for two days.'

Jacopo's attempts to cheer the boy up seemed to have worked after three days from his arrival. His voice was shaken when he spoke of the big Nigerian man. 'He was as big as an armchair. But his eyes were lifeless. He moved, I mean, if you pushed him, he would move. He was basically dead, really dead. I mean a person... he looked like a body without soul.' Dead, really dead, because despite the big size, his eyes did not look alive, and he would barely move when pushed by someone. 'Finally,' Jacopo said, 'He began eating again, and slowly got better and better, day by day... At the beginning of the third day he started to call me. "Doctor!" I had thought to let him live next to my ambulatory, so he slept in the room where we slept. To keep an eye on him.'

Jacopo carried on telling his story, saying that after several days of improvement for Samba, they were informed that he would leave Lampedusa. 'When he left, he was in the bus, with the others. He saw me, and he got off and hugged me... Look, I swear, it was wonderful. He told me, "Thank you doctor, thank you!" And I was like... well... I don't want to cry now. That's it, that's it, don't make me cry. It was a powerful hug, really.'

'You really felt it, didn't you?' I asked.

Jacopo: 'Yes, I did. I really felt it. I am in touch with him and another guy who is now in Germany. I have a photograph of them both in my room. It's me, Samba, and the other one, who used to sing rapping all the time. We, you doctor! Ha ha! That landing was, really, it was a very energetic group...'

If one reflects on Jacopo's story, the moment of the hug that he recounts with such emotional intensity is not only a time of gladness for the young Nigerian man, but also an unforgettable memory for the doctor himself. The doctor felt like crying just by remembering that event; he was emotionally touched by the care manifested by Samba. As Samba was getting better day by day after his arrival at the CPSA, Jacopo had been gaining good memories, sealed by the hug of good bye to Samba, 'a

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<sup>109</sup> A Kinder chocolate.

wonderful' moment for him. The affective power of the hug he had received was shown by the doctor's decision to keep a picture of Samba, two other migrants, and himself, hanging in his room.

Jacopo's account ultimately speaks of how an emotional relationship might possibly be established within a space of detention like the one of the CPSA in Lampedusa. Departing from the paradigm of the camp, according to which migrants are structurally turned into bare lives and migration workers become the ones who must enforce their exclusion from even the most basic rights (Hall 2014), Jacopo's memory introduces humanness to the rather inhuman space of the camp (Agamben 2003). Care moved the doctor to show his presence to the Nigerian migrant from the beginning, allowing him to find alternative ways of helping Samba, which went beyond his role as a doctor in the CPSA. Within the CPSA, the healing process was for many migrants not just the result of medical intervention on physical wounds or infectious diseases, but an exchange of words, smiles and gestures. These reciprocal experiences of give and take leave emotional scars in some migration workers' memories. Getting closer to migrants like Samba on the one hand scared Jacopo emotionally, but on the other hand, it gave him back this 'powerful' and 'wonderful' feeling which nearly made him cry when he spoke of it. As small gestures of care by migration workers acquired an invaluable importance inside the CPSA for the many migrants, reversely, small gestures of migrants towards migration workers could make the difference to their whole experience of being a migration worker in Lampedusa.

As Jacopo explained, and Selene remarked, human relationships gave them the strength to carry on with their life on the island. But human relationships require an intersubjective acknowledgment; they hold on mutuality, reciprocal sharing, and interactions. Such interactions can be inscribed within a spectrum of caring intersubjectivity, ranging from an actual gift (like a birthday cake) to an occasional gesture or word of kindness. In other words, they are fleeting moments which find their core in an exchange of presence, and hold on details, often unnoticeable, or hard to recognize, which forms the emotional web to which persons are tied to one another. It was through those exchanges of presence which both migrants and migration workers could meet, encountering each other as persons with fragilities, necessities, and difficulties to express themselves as they wished to. With time, dedication, and willingness, migrants could be helped in facing their daily struggles inside the CPSA, and migration workers could feel the 'wonderful' sensation of engaging with persons, rather than working with 'non-persons'.

## Conclusion

The ethnographic material that I analysed in this chapter leads to a shift of paradigm in thinking about human relationships within a space of detention and exclusion, such as the CPSA of Lampedusa. Through a ‘thick description’ it shows the ways in which ‘the politics of the national order produces abjection, but bare life itself can form the basis of the urge to acknowledge the other’ (Hall 2014: 86), and to engage in a mutual human relationship. This movement towards others ultimately constitutes the vital energy of living inside the CPSA for many migrants and migration workers. If Hall (2015: 85-86) finds that it is precisely in ‘the camp’, where ‘the state of abjection is constantly impressed’, that one can observe the ‘seeds for alternative engagements’, in this Chapter I hope to have further shown some ways in which the ‘seeds for alternative engagements’ can blossom, shaping both migrants and migration workers’ experiences inside the CPSA.

As I have clarified in the beginning of the Chapter, migration workers are critical to the indifference and obedience to the sovereign power manifested by the many inside the CPSA. As the paediatrician Selene states, ‘literally everyone, sees without moving a finger, knows without saying a word, can do something, but feels tired about it.’ Her words reinforce Ising and Rygiel (2007:184) argument, according to which detention centre can be theorized as an ‘abject space’ where people are treated as if they were non-persons. However, while detention of some people ‘is an exclusionary practice that underpins the very idea of inclusive politics’, the *camp* can be also addressed as a space ‘where there is also constant ambiguity and incompleteness’ (Hall 2014: 84). Such condition of relative arbitrariness in the CPSA can lead to fragility and expose the migration workers to moral responsibility and ethical struggles, where some attempt to find a balance between what can be done, shall be followed, feels right or wrong to do.

In this sense, the CPSA appears as a ‘place where ethical engagement is not wholly removed, and where the cosmopolitan character of moral possibility is exposed’; ethnographically, it emerges as a space where ‘officers cannot ignore the social proximity of the stranger who does not belong but yet is present and who won’t go away’ (Hall 2014:85). Migration workers’ accounts importantly tell us that being part of a faulty system does not necessarily mean to be powerless, but rather, it means to be repeatedly faced with choices and challenges, and to be responsible of one’s actions as well as non-actions. This is what Jackson (2013a) refers to as ‘paranomic’, that is going around, getting around, or finding ways around normality.

One way of finding ways out of the failures upon which the CPSA rested, was for migration workers like Selene and Jacopo to engage with the migrants. This was taking place throughout each ethnographic account in this Chapter, where a reciprocal recognition of one another takes place

among migration workers and *ospiti*. Reciprocal acknowledgment, I argued, does not rest on a high moral code, but it rather manifests itself as a practical response to particular circumstances. Acts of presence can determine moral wounds but also allow for memories of unforgettable joy for both migrants and migration workers. The moment of the hug described by Jacopo in the last section represents the sealing of such relationship.

In this Chapter I have thus explored the relationship between migration worker's attitudes to care about migrants, and migrants' responses to them. Migration workers' narratives moved from moments of sadness, anger, frustration, or pain, to others charged with positive feelings, like care, wonder, and nostalgia. The positive feelings arose when migration workers described moments of sharing and reciprocity with migrants. Thus, the possibility to establish a relationship inside the CPSA is not merely a condition of the Hotspot, but it is the way to transform exclusion in mutuality, and silence in voice. This happens when migration workers realize the 'amusing' feeling of giving time, energy, and care to people who are struggling more than others in that particular circumstance. It is not just a moral reward, but it is the energy that moves human relationships inside the CPSA, transforming spaces of neglect in spaces of mutuality and human recognition. Human relationships are intersubjective; they can transform other's experiences, perceptions of the world, and emotional states, and they can be equally influenced by others, and to a larger extent, by the contingencies in which such relationships are established (Jackson 2007; 2013). In the following and final chapter, I will further explore how human relationships are formed in Lampedusa, how they transform migrants' *lifeworlds*, and what they require to be established within contexts where exclusion and separation is enforced. If care, attention to detail, patience, and presence, contribute to migration workers' capability of establishing an emotional contact with the migrants, by a mutual sharing of feelings, gestures and jokes, what lies at the heart of these fleeting moments?

## Chapter VI ‘It’s all about love’

Mrs Maria was a woman in her eighties, whose name became well known in the Italian news and the main TV programs many years ago. She was introduced to the public as the old lady who gave shelter and food to the many migrants who populated the island of Lampedusa for about three months in 2011<sup>110</sup>. Mrs. Maria was a mother, a grandmother, and a passionate Christian who went to Church more than once a week. As she explained to me when we first met at her house, she was not the only one who helped out the migrants in 2011. ‘Many people gave clothes, food, and opened their house doors in Lampedusa.’ She said. ‘We made food every day, plenty of food, and distributed it to them [migrants].’ Women had a fundamental role in 2011. At that time, the CPSA was not equipped to host more than three hundred people. As a result, it was not equipped to provide food, shelter, and bathrooms for the several thousand migrants who lived on the island. Migrants’ presence had become a serious issue in Lampedusa. In response to a situation of great difficulty, many women in Lampedusa helped out the migrants, cooking very large pots of pasta, and setting up long tables on the street, offering food and drinks to the migrants. When I visited Mrs. Maria, after sitting by the kitchen table with her and being offered a glass of water, she said: ‘What I will never forget is their hunger.’ She shivered as she pronounced those words. ‘When they came to my door, and knocked, saying that they were hungry, and that they only wanted something to eat... those images, you can’t forget them.’ She added: ‘We need to observe the others, to give a smile, a glance, a hug, because when you look at these persons in the eyes, then you become aware of their suffering, and you feel the need to act upon it.’

In her words, Maria described succinctly the notion of compassion, which is for Bauman (2001: 301) a ‘painful emotion’, originating from the ‘awareness of another person’s undeserved misfortune.’ As opposed to indifference, which Herzfeld (1992: 1) describes as ‘the rejection of common humanity... the denial of identity, of selfhood’, compassion is ultimately ‘a matter of putting oneself in the place of the other’ (Jackson 2005: 31). For Maria this requires comprehension, and ‘comprehending each other needs time, and its’ not simple. It must be accomplished patiently, step by step’.<sup>111</sup> When I asked Mrs. Maria what caused some people to acknowledge other’s suffering or

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110 In 2011, following the Arab Spring, Lampedusa received thousands of migrants, mostly Tunisians. By September, the island counted five to ten thousand migrants, and the CPSA in Lampedusa did not have the facilities to welcome them all. The news defined the copious arrival of the migrants as an ‘invasion’, and in September 2011, some locals, embittered by the unacceptable situation, responded to a group of Tunisians protesting near the fuel pump, by assaulting them with sticks and stones (Corriere della Sera 2011). The scene was reported by the National news, and Lampedusani for the first time appeared in the media as intolerant, aggressive, and inhospitable people (Repubblica 2011).

111 For Jackson (2005: 32), the object of our understanding, and ‘the method whereby we achieve it’ is about going ‘some ways toward overcoming our estrangement from others, finding some common ground, and working out ways in which coexistence is possible in a divided world.’ While anthropologists’ urge to grasp what seems hard to comprehend may result from their passion for human diversity, a desire to capture societies’ commonalities, or their hunger for cultural complexities, Mrs. Maria’s need to act upon others’ suffering, could be captured by her use of the term Love.



dismiss it, she said: 'It's all about love. Love is key to life. Remember my dear, you can't buy love, you can only give it.'

Love is one of the most common terms to many of us, yet, given its uncountable, unmeasurable, and transformative nature, it is always difficult to really agree on an exact definition of it.<sup>112</sup> Love emerges in Maria's words as the foundation of life, and the way to approach difficulties. As a priceless value, love cannot be reduced to a measurable unit of exchange or barter. Instead, its essence lies in its 'towardness', which is devoid of purpose, or in other words, whose only purpose is to contribute to others' well-being by the act of giving (Ahmed 2003).

In this chapter, I will further explore Mrs. Maria's use of the term love by critically reflecting on her words from a multiple perspective which takes into consideration locals, tourists and migrants, in different contexts. Mrs. Maria's words will be significantly illuminated by each ethnographic section, to argue that there is a constant tension between 'moral norms and ethical dilemmas' (Jackson 2013b: 7), between ideologies and everyday approaches with others, which often clash, or fail to be accomplished. As Mookherjee (2011: 89) argues in her work on the aesthetics of 'genocidal' cosmopolitanism in Bangladesh, public forms of memorialisation of dramatic events within a local community or a country, often appeal to a cosmopolitan sense of the real which is fragmentary, incomplete, and 'can never, ultimately, derive from the self-same space or time of the nation'. Such fragmentation or incompleteness is furthermore evident in how local communities like the one of Lampedusani participate in religious events and public speeches holding on the values of 'compassion', and ultimately by some extent failing to actively respond to them accordingly (Ben-Yohayada 2016).

If in the previous chapter I explored the ways in which migration workers related to the migrants within the space of the CPSA, confirming and transgressing the paradigm of the camp (Agamben 2003), in this chapter, I push further Levinas' (1979) take on ethics as born out of an encounter with others (Chapter V), arguing that ethics can transcend political, cultural, social, and economic boundaries. By the use of exceptional and everyday situations — the migrants' protest in May 2016, a day at the beach in July, and Vincenzo's relationship with the dead migrants from the 1990s to present time — I address tourists, locals, and migrants' multiple ways of responding to each other's presence and needs. I present them from different perspectives, contingencies, and worldviews; all with different and equal needs, desires, and possibilities to interact with one another. I address these ethnographic moments, treating indifference as a form of unwillingness to

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<sup>112</sup> For Lacan (XX 17) 'the moment one begins to speak about love, one descends into imbecility', because love acquires its meaning by action and through each experience one makes of it. Nevertheless, people speak of, reason about, and act upon their sense of love. As Demandante (2014: 103) argues 'in as much as it is universal, love is clouded with particular experiences which lead human beings to define it in various ways.' Concepts have a life which their beholder carries, hides, and expresses in ways which are at times silent, because they do not convey with words what they ought to express, and the experiences upon which they raised (Das 2007).

acknowledge the Other (Arendt 1958), which is influenced by social, political, and cultural images. I will thus begin by analysing the tensions and acts of mutuality between migrants and locals taking place during the migrants' protest in May 2016, to show how indifference can turn into violence, and love can raise from a simple exchange of glances and words among locals, tourists, and migrants. I will then explore what happens during a regular day at the beach, to further push my argument; that both indifference and Love<sup>113</sup> are human qualities, influenced by cultural, political, or social images, but ultimately originating in the ways in which people respond to one another in a given situation (Josephides 2014). Acts of Love will then be regarded as sparks of life, which can arise from anyone, in any given circumstance, by an interplay of agency and patience. Love is the manifest form of the 'awareness' or 'feeling' of acting upon a shared sense of humanity, which goes beyond contingency, social or legal status, culture, and as I will state, which can also go beyond the rigid demarcation between life and death. The figure of Vincenzo, the old cemetery-gatekeeper who buried dozens of dead migrants in Lampedusa, will be further introduced to suggest that Love, as a human quality, can transcend political, social, cultural, or existential inequalities, moving across them, and allowing to establish an interaction not only among the alive, but also with the dead migrants. Both indifference and Love, I will ultimately argue, are attempts to reduce and cope with the gaps between what some ought to do, and what they can achieve, determining very different situations, and 'capable of creating worlds' (Josephides 2014: 17), as well as producing significantly diverse *lifeworlds*.

At the same time, small gestures do not overcome social, political, or legal inequalities. They do not solve tensions completely, and they do not create harmony among everyone. They however push for opening up to others, reducing distance, fighting indifference, and allowing for mutual respect and acknowledgment to take place. Jackson's (2005) use of '*existential aporia*' is theoretically helpful to critically interpret the ethnographic material. *Existential aporias* are moments in life, where 'there appears no way through the no-man's-land in which we sometimes find ourselves lost' (Jackson 2005: xiii); these may arise for multiple reasons and take indefinite forms in everyone's life. In light of it, in this chapter I ought to recognize the principles through which these existential gaps can determine a distance from others or call for an acknowledgment of others. Let's then turn to the following section, to introduce indifference and Love as possible forms of approaching others, solving tensions, and relating to one another. During the migrants' protest in May 2016, the importance of a glance, or a gesture of kindness, could really become a bridge to connect people to one another in Lampedusa, even if partially, momentarily, and from legally and socio-economically different standpoints.

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<sup>113</sup> I will use Love rather than love throughout the chapter to delineate a specific form of love, which acknowledges other others, rather than rejecting them, fearing them, or neglecting them, moved by a sense of togetherness and humanness which always begins as a spark, or a movement toward the other.

## ‘We shall not let indifference rule’

Lampedusa, 8<sup>th</sup> May 2016. Four days ago, about sixty migrants gathered together in the square opposite the Church of San Geraldo in protest. Their act was the outcome of the Dublin regulation, according to which the Member State registering migrants at entry will be responsible for them, until or unless they meet the requirements to be hosted in another Member State. As a result, if the migrants in protest accepted to give their fingerprints, they would not be granted permission to live outside Italy, where they aimed to be. Migrants had slept and spent most of their time on the cemented floor, by the bushes on the sides of the square, eating panini, drinks, and pasta which volunteers and workers from Mediterranean Hope and Askavusa brought them during the day. Some locals showed solidarity to the migrants, others repulsion and intolerance.

Today the Archbishop Montenegro will say Mass for the Ascension of Jesus. Before the Mass began, I saw the long queue of priests, all wearing white vests, entering the Church from the side entrances, avoiding walking where the migrants were resting. Some of them, I noticed, gave quick glances to the migrants, but many pretended that they were not there. The priests entered the Church and I decided to follow them. As the Archbishop Montenegro is saying Mass, standing still, speaking from the Ambon, magnificently dressed, he declares that ‘We shall not let indifference rule.’ ‘Perhaps’ he continues, ‘we won’t have the magic wand, but opening your hearts to those people in the square is important.’ After citing some of the Biblical scriptures, he adds, ‘When we are out, let’s look at those people, they are not a nuisance, they are a scream of suffering. You are in front of the bleeding Christ out there, and you are facing the healed Christ in here.’ (See Figure 9). As we exit the Church, three years after the shipwreck of 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2013, a local mother with her children walks through the square. The children look at some of the migrants who are sitting on the floor, while their mother mostly keeps the glance on her children. They then stop to talk with a woman who volunteers for the Misericordie Lampedusa. In the meantime, the group of priests comes out. One of them says, ‘Ok, now we split up, some will go here, some there’, pointing at his right and left side. They then walk down the stairs of the Church, and split up accordingly. None of them acknowledges the migrants or looks at them. As other people exit the Church, they leave from the right or left sides of the stairs, avoiding crossing the square where the migrants sit, or lie, exhausted. Archbishop Montenegro’s call vanished into indifference. He later came out of Church and came to chat with some of the migrants with the help of an anthropologist and myself who translated for him in Arabic, French and English.

Archbishop Montenegro's words reiterated his speech during his visit to Lampedusa in 2013, following the shipwreck of 3<sup>rd</sup> October, when he said: 'It is Jesus who boards the boat' (Pontificium Consilium pro Familia 2013). As Ben-Yohayada (2016:25) argues, the Christian invitation to connect 'the image of Jesus to the migrants themselves', ultimately 'shaped the struggle between the Italian and the European institutions over collective moral worth and responsibility.' Pope Francis declared the shipwreck of 3<sup>rd</sup> October to be 'a disgrace' (Vatican 2013), and the President of the European Commission warned for an urgent emergency to face collectively and responsibly.

In the current anthropological debate on undocumented migration in the Mediterranean, scholars like Ben Yohayada (2016: 27; 7) have addressed the existing gaps between the political and religious, as well as academic calls for pan humanism, for a shared and equal world, and the 'tensions between the different scales of inclusion and exclusion, of equality and inequality... which hosts and guests negotiate with each other across the threshold of welcome or trespass.' Despite the constant media representation of catastrophes at sea, and the political and religious calls for ending it, migrants keep dying, the business of migration proliferates, and the people who are most directly involved in such issues, become victims, and in turn producers, of global inequalities. Not all, however, live in passivity and act upon indifference.



**Figure 9. Archbishop Montenegro is saying Mass inside the Church of San Geraldo during the migrants' protest**

Struggles for comprehension and acts of acknowledgment

8<sup>th</sup> May 2016, 10 am. Migrants are still protesting in front of the Church. The square is populated by young men, and a few women, who sit or lie down on the floor, while others stand still, in groups of three to six people, mostly wearing the usual green, red, and yellow track suits provided by the CPSA. Some of them are still resting on the floor, wrapped in blankets, to protect themselves from the light of the strong sun, and recover from the cold of last night. On the metal semi-sphered sculpture at the centre of the square, blankets and clothes are hanging to dry (See Figure 10). Where the plants are, lie the tired bodies of some migrants, who seek shelter under a bush, or by saplings, olive trees and flowers.

The previous night, it had rained heavily. There is a pregnant woman among the protestors, and Rosalia, a member of Askavusa, asks me to find out how she is. I am the only one speaking English at that moment, and with the help of an English and Tigrinya speaking migrant, I can talk to the pregnant woman, who only spoke Tigrinya. I understand that she urgently needs a doctor, who will come later that day. In the meantime, I meet some migrants whom I spoke to yesterday. They look shaken. Yemma, the 18 year old boy from The Gambia is exhausted; he struggles to stand still, and nearly does not recognize me. His friend crosses his arms, shaking, to signal me that last night was very cold. 'Brrr', he says, keeping his smile. Yemma instead seems disappointed and too tired to smile. Next to me, Lillo, a local in his fifties, walks to the centre of the square, holding several bags of bread, which he has bought earlier in the morning for the protestors. 'Poor them', he says, 'they were all wet and cold this morning, with the heavy rain of last night...' Care was at the heart of Lillo's words. He welcomed migrants to his home during the past decades, offering food, helping out with the requests for documents, and adopting a teenage boy from Senegal a few years before, after a long bureaucratic journey. Lillo's words, when we talked about the issue of migration, were filled by sadness and a rooted feeling of inadequacy. He said, 'I can't stand seeing these scenes over and over again. It makes my heart bleed.' The political, legal, economic and social tensions which in the past decades had characterized the phenomenon of undocumented migration on the island of Lampedusa, clashed with Lillo's urge to welcome the migrants as he would do with any other guest.



**Figure 10. Migrants and members of Askavusa at the square of San Geraldo's Church on 8<sup>th</sup> May 2016.**

Welcoming newcomers was an old trait of the inhabitants of Lampedusa. It dated back to the figure of the hermit who once inhabited the island by himself, in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, welcoming both Muslim and Christian travellers who needed a place to rest. Lampedusa was not a frontier then as it is now (Cuttritta 2012), but a conjunction between Muslims and Christians, a '*porto franco*<sup>114</sup>', where battles or diatribes would be suspended for the sake of reciprocal peace, and harmony (Fragapane 1993). Such welcoming attitude did not cease to exist among the inhabitants of the island. In the early 1990s, as Doctor Pola reminded me, people helped the migrants as they could, 'because we were experiencing a very soft migration in numbers, unexpected, and unregulated by the government.' Boats landed on Lampedusa's shores with numbers of ten to twenty migrants usually, who were welcomed to people's houses, hosted by the doctors managing the Health Clinic in Lampedusa, and generally supported by the local community. As migration grew into a social, political, and internationally recognized phenomenon, the State and the private cooperatives took control of it, and the local community became by imposition the host of a Hotspot, and by extension, of 'the industry of undocumented migration' (Andersson 2014).

As I have argued in previous chapters, local people seemed to have embraced and made good profit out of such transformation. Others, have tried over the years to resist it, struggling for spaces of mutual recognition to be established within the social texture of the island. Don Mimmo, who was the priest of Lampedusa in 2016, welcomed the members and volunteers of Mediterranean Hope to gather together with locals, or tourists, in weekly meetings where people would discuss local issues to be urgently addressed. Askavusa's members used their base, a cave facing the New Port, to

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114 Free port

deconstruct critically the simplistic political and media discourses, inviting classes of students and tourists from different parts of Italy during their art exhibitions and public talks. Nino, the founder of the Archivio Storico Lampedusa, began welcoming small groups of migrants to offer them a few hours of Italian lessons, in which I often participated. In Lampedusa, many people had tried to work for establishing a contact among the locals, the tourists, and the migrants, but as Maria said, it needed time.

In the evening of the same day, a woman with her child came close to where I was sitting, with John and some other migrants. The little girl observed the young men sitting on the floor, while her mother loudly expressed her regret for that ‘unpleasant situation.’ Bending down on her knees, the mother asked some guys how they were, if they needed something. ‘Can you speak English?’ she asked me. Then, I translated for her, ‘I am very sorry for you [to the guys sitting on the floor]. Here we are unable to do much more than giving what we have.’ She had brought some sweets and bread for them and left them to Rosalia and Alfio, members of Askavusa and Mediterranean Hope, who collected food or objects donated by the locals. ‘We have no power to do much. That’s all in the governments’ hands’, the woman said. Yemma replied with humility: ‘For us, all you are doing is more than enough! And we really thank you for it.’ The lady understands what he says, and repeats once more, ‘You know, we are so sorry for this bad situation... we have seen many horrible things...’

One could argue that the lady from Lampedusa was excusing her failure to be a good host, attributing the responsibility of migrants’ ‘bad situation’ to the failure of the governments in managing the business of migration. The situation in Lampedusa during the protest was difficult to handle for everyone, and despite many people’s attempt to find a quick and satisfying solution to both please the protestors and clear the space outside the square. The way in which the authorities handled the protest left everyone in a circle of unanswered questions. According to Herzfeld (1992), the roots of social indifference rest on popular attitudes, on which bureaucrats, the state, the system, and the government, become responsible to common people’s everyday struggles, suffering, accidents, and states of abandonment. Certainly, blaming the government, the police, or the mayor, were tactics for dealing with a situation which locals felt as impossible to solve by any means. However, what made the difference between reproducing the indifferent/absent attitude of the state and showing presence to the migrants was people’s attitudes to one another. The lady from Lampedusa chose to stop by the square and talk to Yemma. She communicated her regret to him and the others, trying to speak to them, although she did not understand their language. As opposed to the attitude of many other Lampedusani who maintained the distance from the protestors, making comments on them while sitting on their café tables, or standing on the other side of the pavement staring at them, she moved a step towards comprehension, aware of the fact that a solution to the protestors’ problems was far

from her reach. In her simplicity, hers was a manifestation of Love, as Mrs. Maria understood it. It was an urge to acknowledge the protestors as persons who were going through ‘horrible things’, and an attempt to let them know that she was there for them. As a result, the woman expressed her feelings for the migrants, and Yemma appreciated her words, which at that time, he valued greatly.

On the other hand, many others in Lampedusa had avoided any form of contact, confrontation, or exchange with the protestors. They had not only avoided a direct contact with the migrants, but soon after the Mass, locals became impatient, and intolerance spread all over the place. Some members of Misericordie Lampedusa<sup>115</sup>, expressed their disagreement to those who had been cooking for the protestors, and helping them mediate with the police — because there was an armoured police car monitoring the protestors just in front of the Church, but mediation had only taken place on the second day of the protest.

For Mrs. Maria, while a smile or a glance can bridge the gaps between others and us, ‘indifference destroys everything’. The absence of an interest for the migrants’ needs, life situations, political, legal, and existential rights, as the image of the locals exiting Church after Mass and dismissing the protestors showed, let indifference grow and allowed violence to spread. When in fact, due to increasing discontent among the locals, the protestors moved to the kindergarten, about a mile from the Church, two of them were violently attacked by two street vendors from Lampedusa. The two men claimed that they had seen two migrants stealing them some fruit. I was there when the accident took place. The two migrants had tried to buy some fruit and took it to show it to one of the men, but the locals shouted back at them in dialect with swear words, chasing them as if they wanted to beat them up. From that moment, the atmosphere in Lampedusa became more intolerant than before, and indifference turned into passive/active forms of aggression against the protestors. Locals’ point of view was that the protestors should have followed the rules, give the fingerprints, and leave the island, because otherwise the tourist season could suffer from their protest. However, they hardly managed to communicate with the migrants, or to comprehend what the members of Askavusa or Mediterranean Hope were trying to explain: those people were there because they wanted to leave Lampedusa. Locals and migrants wanted the same thing, but lack of communication won over their ultimate interests.

Such inability, unwillingness, or struggle for comprehension, emerged as a mixture of externally (social, political, legal, economic), and individually constituted factors. As a borderland, Lampedusa had become a frontier where people lived in limit-situations, where they had to constantly negotiate what they ought to do and could possibly achieve. As it happened during the protest, when the presence of the migrants turned into a possible threat for their personal interests, locals often felt

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<sup>115</sup> These were volunteers who provided a medical service to elders, invalid people, and migrants during the landings



frustrated, and tried to find quick and practical solutions to what felt as a problem to them. Pretending not to see them or finding a strategy through which they would return to the CPSA, was one way of reducing the threat. As the next section will show, the need to maintain a distance from the migrants was a widespread trait also among the locals. The need to keep a distance from the migrants was an attitude of some tourists, a ‘poison’, as a lady defined it, which created distance among the people, turning compassion into a threat, and indifference into the protection for others. However, maintaining the distance was often a necessity which others overcame by showing interest for the migrants. Establishing a contact among them could turn migrants’ anonymous faces into familiar voices, names, and personalities.

### Smiling onto the ‘poison of indifference’

It is July, and the Guitgia beach is covered with a carpet of bright coloured umbrellas, with white and blue chairs. Tourists, locals, and migration workers who are out of duty, playing beach volley, beach tennis, and football. As I walk towards the rocky area on the left side of the beach, where I spot a dozen of Sub-Saharan African migrants, I overhear some tourists’ conversations. I notice two women and a child playing by the shore. The two women comment loudly that ‘after all, they [Police?] let them [the migrants] come out [the CPSA]. At least they let them go swimming for a few hours, before bringing them back later.’ Judging from their conversation, the two tourists are not aware of the mechanisms of detention and ‘free exit’ experienced by some groups of migrants on the island. Migrants do not have authorized permit to exit the CPSA. They have no swimming trunks. Most of them wear underwear. They have no beach towels, and they have no one accompanying them to the beach. The conversation of the two tourists referred to the migrants as a specific category of people whose freedom to enjoy the sea, rather than remaining isolated in detention inside the CPSA, was a public issue, to be evaluated and discussed with “reasonably moral” tones. While they are comfortably relaxing on their floatable rubber boats, the two tourists give a glance to the African guys on the rocks, adding that, ‘At least they don’t cause any trouble, so I guess that they can stay here for some time.’ With naïve words, as it seemed, the two women’s conversation resembled the tones of a magnanimous host — the Police, and by a larger degree, the State — whose space could be shared, even if for only some time, with ‘pitiful,’ but after all ‘lucky enough’ migrants. Their words can be read as a projection of the call for exclusion upon which the politics of “inclusion” on undocumented migrants rests (Gatta 2012). Their comments were caused by and causation of a never-ending public debate that calls for a morally reasonable, politically safe, and economically convenient way of handling the migrants, as if they were objects to be treated, categories to be relabelled, or problems

to be solved by mathematical operations. The end-result of such political and media discourse was often a common sense of dissatisfaction shared among the tourists and the locals. This is because after decades of debates, political manoeuvres for rescuing the migrants, welcoming them, and relocating them, overall, the migrants kept reaching the island of Lampedusa. The menace of the ‘invasion’, or the one of ‘contagion’ represented by immigrants, thus materialized during the tourists’ holidays.

As the two tourists made their comments, others observed the migrants who dived in the sea, jumping from the rocky platform on the left side of the beach. Some seemed interested, others disturbed, and many simply uninterested. I notice several people who stop their swimming as they realize that they are fairly close to a migrant at sea. They change trajectory or decide to come back to the shore. Giuditta, a woman in her sixties who had been coming to Lampedusa for more than twenty years before, told me about some comments she had just heard before I came to the beach that day. ‘People are bad’ She lamented. ‘Because they are rotten and poisoned inside.’ I asked her to explain better what had happened. ‘Oh, see’, Giuditta began, mocking the snobbish voice of some woman sitting among the tourists, ‘We should go swimming over there today. We have to watch out for the demarcation line, where the piss area is’ Giuditta said, repeating what the woman had said some time earlier. The migrants were swimming by the rocks on the left side of the beach, about fifty to seventy meters away from the shore, but the woman was apparently worried that the migrants would urinate, and that their urine would come where she was bathing, as if contagion of some imaginary disease might contaminate the tourists. Some in Lampedusa strove to protect their comfort zone. After all, they were on a holiday, and did not want to feel uncomfortable, as if someone was invading their spaces, or contaminating the water where they swam. Most of the people who came to Lampedusa for holiday seemed to use the narrative of the ‘dirty migrant’, or the ‘diseased migrant’ widely used in the political and media discourse on migration, to make a statement: ‘they [the migrants] can stay here, but at due distance.’ Such paradigm of exclusion firstly emerged by the particular way in which tourists mostly occupied the sandy beach, and the migrants, in an absolute minority, gathered around the rocks on the side of the beach, in a marginal space (See Figure 11). There was an imaginary “demarcation line” to be preserved, a space between tourists and migrants, which determined a physical and a relational distance.



**Figure 11. Tourists (holydaymakers) at the Guitgia beach. Photo taken from the rocks, where migrants used to spend their time.**

Such distance between tourists and migrants was for Giuditta nothing else than the manifest expression, or the mirror one could say, of being ‘rotten and poisoned inside’, a projection of a “ill” self, which failed time to time to acknowledge others simply as persons, who felt like enjoying the beach, relaxing, or spending some good time, as the many other tourists were. As Kristeva (1991: 21-192) argues, ‘strangeness is universal’, as it does not concern the Other, but it is rather a projection of ‘our disturbing otherness’ into an external object or person. As a result, foreignness is a projection of a part of the self that is unknown and feared.’ (Josephides 2014: 3).

One could argue that such ‘poisoned selves’ were the outcome of ongoing political and media conversation on the phenomenon of undocumented migration in Italy, which consolidated the image of the undocumented migrant as ‘someone displaying somewhat criminal or occult behaviour’ (Lucht 2011: 18), or as someone who ‘unduly and dangerously occupies spaces commonly perceived as intimately “Italian” (Ravenda 2012: 40) [My translation]. The social production of the ‘undocumented migrant’ caused some tourists to often struggle to overcome their pre-imagined understanding of who the migrants were, rejecting the possibility to actually establish a closer relationship with them. Some in Lampedusa strived to protect their comfort zone. After all, they were on a holiday, and did not want to feel uncomfortable, as if someone was invading their spaces, or contaminating the water where they swam.

‘As if we never pee in the water, right?’ Giuditta carried on. ‘Easy to talk with full pockets. I would like to see them, in their conditions. I would like to see what they would say.’ For Giuditta, tourists’ incapability of putting themselves in others’ shoes, and their intolerance shown against the migrants, was the outcome of judging other people from their safe standpoint. If they were the migrants, she was sure, the tourists would never talk as they did.

In ‘Economies of Abandonment’, Povinelli (2011: 162) argues that even empathy, which may be often envisaged as a necessary condition to approach people, risks to become a further means of exclusion, as it ‘initiates a separation between you and me.’ Like compassion, empathy presumes that one would put oneself in someone else’s shoes. ‘As a result, to give to you may end up seeming like a taking away from me because mine seems to be mine’ (Ibid: 181). Or in other words, you may seem to take something away from me, because I am regarding something as belonging to me along which in fact does not belong to me alone, but belongs to many, or to all. On the basis of Povinelli’s argument, the tourists complaining about the presence of the migrants at the Guitgia beach, felt that empathy for the migrants may have resulted in a loss. For some tourists, sharing their space with the migrants meant giving away something that they felt was theirs.

For Giuditta, lack of compassion could be justified by the fact that some tourists were ‘people who became wealthy recently’ and yet they were ‘so poor culturally.’ As Carrithers (2009) argues, the concept of culture is an utterly uncountable, complex, and hard to reach one, as ‘any culture has plentiful alternative schemas, narratives and values, so that no one is able simply to read off the appropriate actions or statements from some table of right things to think, do and say which they have learned’ (Ibid. 4). Speaking of culture is thus an always complex exercise which can never be so simply reduced to a total compliance to a particular moral code, or a *lifeworld*. To be ‘culturally poor’ means to ignore common knowledge, and in this specific instance, it meant to have a limited knowledge of what the phenomenon of migration was, what the people we referred to as ‘the migrants’ individually went through during their journey to Europe, and what life conditions they experienced. The UN presently reports on the ‘prolonged arbitrary or otherwise unlawful detention and systematic human rights violations in custodial contexts’ in post-2011 Libya (UN 2018: 8). In judging some tourists’ responses to the presence of the migrants at the beach, Giuditta opposed a kind of wealth resting on material possessions, to a poverty of knowledge, but also a poverty of culture understood as the capability of recognizing how we may feel, what we could do, and what we may say, if we were in others’ shoes. This poverty of culture is a projection of the call for exclusion upon which the politics of “inclusion” of undocumented migrants’ rests, determining a never-ending public debate that calls for a morally reasonable, politically safe, and economically convenient way of handling the migrants, as if they were objects to be treated, categories to be relabelled, or problems

to be solved by mathematical operations. The end-result of such political and media discourse was often a common sense of dissatisfaction, because after decades of debates, political manoeuvres for rescuing the migrants, welcoming them, and relocating them, overall, the migrants kept reaching the island of Lampedusa, and the tourists, kept seeing the menace of the ‘invasion’, or the one of ‘contagion’, materializing during their holidays. As a result, some chose to do something about it. They were on holiday and could not stand the presence of the migrants.

Such diversity of behaviour among the tourists, however, rather than holding on to a particular cultural trait, or a more or less rich gradient of culture, had to do with the particular ways in which people experienced and responded, ‘to specified conditions of living with others in the world’ (Josephides 2014: 2). For Jackson (2005), compassion or indifference are in fact the expressions of how people approach the world and relate to others; they depend on how much value one gives to the here and the now, to preconceptions, stereotypes, and pre-imagined ideas of the people one encounters in life. If indifference can become one of the most dangerous conditions for human relations and for humanity as a whole (Arendt 1958), openness towards others, which can be expressed through kindness, forgiveness, or in other words Love, is a human quality. As such, these qualities transcend the cultural, and the political, ‘which can use or abuse’ such quality ‘for pragmatic or practical ends’ (Josephides 2014: 2).

Compassion, as an expression of Love, thus did not emerge as a cultural, political, social, or cultural form, but as an individual and personal characteristic. It allowed for relationships to be established across political or cultural boundaries, because it rested upon the notion that we as human beings, we could all potentially experience, or at least imagine how it would feel to experience, what others are going through. Rasta, the Gambian migrant whom I am going to introduce, will further suggest that Love is a response to indifference, and a practical act of overcoming structural inequalities, which the migrants who cross the Mediterranean Sea both experience from a global and a local perspective.

### Moralities and ethics: Human rights and humanness

During a very hot afternoon, I sat next to Rasta, an eighteen-year-old man from The Gambia, who landed in Lampedusa about a week before. Rasta had been tortured in Libya, and still had some fresh wounds on the head from being beaten with an iron chair by a Libyan smuggler of roughly the same age. Rasta was critical of the current political and humanitarian situation concerning undocumented migration. ‘The UN gets money from billionaires from all over the world. Their interest is to help people in grave situations. If they wanted to help immigrants, they would have done so already. But where is the money? What are they doing to stop this? People are being tortured, imprisoned, they

are dying and suffering, and who is there to stop this?’ He was firm on where he stood. ‘I don’t believe in Human Rights.’ He declared. ‘What they do is just talk. They sit in their chairs working for humanitarian stuff, but they know nothing about the migrants. They don’t know what it is to be one of us. We suffer, and all of this suffering does not get paid back. While the others (people working for humanitarian purposes), those who are benefitting from it, are sitting in their chairs, far away from everything.’

Rasta evokes the concept of distance as both a spatial and an emotional gap, one could say, between the world from which the Humanitarian language operates at the level of governments, and the lives of the migrants. This divide, Rasta believed, was much about an incomprehension of what being a migrant actually was about: the suffering, torture, violence of all kinds, and humiliation suffered; the hopes that were not met, the lives taken away by criminals, and the state of constant move towards somewhere better, and something more rewarding. Further than that, despite their sacrifices, migrants knew that they would never get back an equal share of what they had experienced (receive justice and recognition). It was on the basis of this unequal share of well-being, rights, and freedom, that Rasta could firmly argue that ‘there is a big business’ behind the phenomenon of undocumented migration. He told me, like dozens of other people I met, that the journey of each migrant was like a jump into the dark. They would be smuggled from their country of origin to checkpoints where they would have to pay smugglers each time to carry on their journey. Once they are in Libya, migrants often had to hide in abandoned houses, but often, the police found them and imprisoned them. Prisons were hell-like spaces where there was no clean water, barely some food, inadequate hygienic conditions, with broken bathrooms and mattresses full of insects. Some could escape, after being subjected to beatings, sexual violence. Often migrants were being sold for some dozens of dinars to smugglers from police agents. If they could receive money from their families, they pay the price to proceed their journey to Tripoli, and hopefully leave by boat.

Scholars like Portes (1978), Feldman (2012) and Andersson (2014) have argued that the phenomenon of illegal migration works like an industry organized as very different groups. First are the European employers in need of a stipend, then the criminal organizations and mafias constituting the world of ‘smugglers’, then the companies investing on surveillance and detention collaborating with governments. From the criminals smuggling caravans of migrants through checkpoints across the Sahara Desert and up to Libya, to the security companies building surveillance systems deployed for ‘defending’ national borders, Rasta knew that there is a business which entwines local and global interests (Andersson 2014). These all have in common one unfortunate factor: the making of migrants into the sources of their own existence. After all, Rasta, like many of the migrants whom I have met in Lampedusa, had to personally experience the circuit of illegality, paying for crossing the borders

of Gambia, being smuggled all the way to Libya, beaten, and ultimately left to live, or to die, in the Mediterranean Sea. Humanitarian interventions often fail to preserve life, and more often, they struggle to maintain the dignity of the 'vulnerable' people they ought to help, against a political 'evil' force (Fassin and Pandolfi 2010). However, the failure to treat one with dignity, or to preserve one's rights, does not necessarily mean that one would consequentially lose her sense of dignity, her feel of rights, and her understanding of life. Migrants' life stories allowed them to both be witnesses of injustice and powerful voices in the system of undocumented migration.

I thought of Mrs. Maria's words. She said that indifference destroyed everything, but after she explained the 'dangerous' character of shutting one's door to others, she talked about the fundamental role of love, as key to life and the core of people's comprehension. As Rasta and I carried on our conversation in July at the Guitgia beach, I could see, somehow more practically delineated and effectively expressed, what Maria was trying to tell me. The rest of my conversation with Rasta will help illuminate ethnographically Maria's words.

### The smile of the African coast

Rasta thought of the Gambians as 'poor but happy people... You know, you cannot buy happiness.' He smiled as he told me that. 'Every person we meet, we smile, we always smile. And we don't differentiate. For Rasta, we were all human beings, and deserved to be treated with equal respect, to be approached as persons; and persons approach other persons by smiling. This is how Gambians are, he explained to me, because 'Gambia is the smile of the African coast.' A smile which the great majority of Gambians whom I met in Lampedusa carried with them most of the time, despite everything: the conditions of detention inside the CPSA, the frustration of not knowing the day of their departure from Lampedusa, the impossibility to call their loved ones once their five euros sim cards run out of credit, and the generally hostile or disinterested glances of the majority of tourists, and many other locals. Rasta's smile, I noticed, was an invitation to approach him more pleasantly. It was a form of letting the other (myself in this case) be more at home, more at ease, and more prone to open up to him, as he did with me. As a good anthropologist, Rasta knew how to deal with strangers, and despite the fact that he was detained inside the CPSA, he had no documents, he knew nothing about his future possibilities, and he was generally speaking 'an irregular immigrant' as many of the people on holiday in Lampedusa were concerned, his smile did not cease to show on his face. For Rasta, smiling was a strategy of being, and a statement of our common humanity, based on how one feels for others, and behaves with others. His approach to the world was born out of an attitude

towards others which, rather than holding on the social, legal, or political status, valued persons with respect and equality.

At the Guitgia beach, things could change very fast; it was mostly a game of perspective. As I moved to the rocks, and sat next to a group of migrants, I felt as if I were more distant from the ‘poisonous tongues’ of the tourists. Aware of what I had just heard, I felt closer to the migrants, who seemed relaxed and joyful. A couple of Italian tourists swam up to where some other migrants were diving, and began chatting with them, in English. Later on, they were loudly laughing about some football player they all knew. I thought that, as strange as it could appear, fishing and footballing seemed to be good enough topics of encounter among migrants and ‘whites’, as the migrants usually called the non-Africans in Lampedusa, me included. Two French children come next to the rocky platform where the migrants dive from, to throw their fishing line. One of the migrants comes close to the child with the line, to observe him fishing. The two exchange a few words. The child explains to him how to fish. He does it carefully, to make sure that he understands. Another migrant comes, and the other child, about eight years old, begins asking questions of him. He seems very interested to hear what the African man has to say; an interest which I have rarely observed among the adults until then. Perhaps, the ‘capacity for becoming other in relation to other selves’, which Jackson argues ‘is the basis for mutual recognition and empathy’, is nothing more and nothing less than the capability of acting with the spontaneity that a child can manifest towards others, and the surrounding world by a further extent. The capability of being curious for others’ stories, and the sense of interest for difference, for the unknown, the strange, or the less common than usual, constitutes the basis for intersubjective encounters. These relationships, before being moved by a moral sense of right or wrong, or a culturally, socially, or politically matured position, rest on one’s interest, openness, and willing attitude towards others. Here, the notion of moral agency, as critically discussed by Carrithers (2005), helps unravel the inherently intersubjective and situational character of ethics, which is born out of the particular ways in which one responds to a given situation, by openness or closure, agency or patiency. As the French children did, together with a few other tourists, migrants’ attitudes were (for me extraordinarily at that time) open to whoever showed interest towards them. Smiling, I learnt, was not only a cultural trait of the Gambian coast, but it was a fundamental approach to the others which allowed for unexpected encounters even in the apparently least favourable contexts. It was a manifestation of Love, as Maria thought of it, and like a smile, it could not be purchased, but only it could be given.

As Rasta and the others knew, indifference could produce or allow for political and social abandonment. The outcomes, as I have shown, could be observed by the tensions determined between locals and migrants during the protest in May, or the distance left between tourists and migrants at



the beach. At large, political and social indifference had further contributed to the death of 5143 migrants in the Mediterranean Sea in 2016 alone (the numbers are approximate) (Missing Migrants Project 2019). Lampedusa has had a long historical and religious tradition of welcoming others, and its inhabitants showed an important sense of hospitality and compassion for the groups of migrants who have landed there since the 1990s, before the operational system of the Hotspot was in place, and before the issue of undocumented migration had become a political and economic national and global phenomenon (Aime 2018). Many Lampedusani have struggled to come to terms with ‘schizophrenic’ and ‘theatrical’ political manoeuvres which all led to decades of migrants’ suffering, painful stories, and death (Cuttitta 2012).

Not all, but a portion of people who lived in Lampedusa, felt the need to respond to others’ suffering, although over the decades it became clear that, despite their efforts, the political and economic situation would hardly change, and if it did so, it would take a long time. In this last section, I thus return to Vincenzo’s story, which I first introduced in Chapter II, to reveal how the personal encounter with migrants’ corpses pushed the old cemetery-gatekeeper to produce a third dimension, an in-between space, bridging the world of alive and dead people. Through his dreams, Vincenzo had tried to respond to migrants’ call for an acknowledgment which was often experienced as a form of global and local indifference.

## Love in life, love in death

In the past decades, literature on migration based on the practices of welcoming migrants grew dramatically (Ravenda 2012; Gatta 2012; Cuttitta 2012; De Michelis 2017). As we scan through recent and less recent papers on the phenomenon, researchers address critically and from different methodological and theoretical perspectives the logical and mathematical operating models used by policy makers, based on socio-economic discourses, guidelines for globally intervening in local communities, safeguarding life at sea, reshaping the politics of monitoring the Mediterranean in relation to NGOs. Ideal intervention programs for handling the business of undocumented migration are mediated by screens which make up for a digital reality, and often do not account for the people who have met the migrants, alive or dead, at sea, or at land, as they crossed the Mediterranean Sea (Andersson 2014). Many fishermen from Lampedusa<sup>116</sup> retrieved migrants’ corpses. They have been the first to encounter the migrants, without having a chance to maintain a distance from them. As they pulled the fishing nets on boat, fishermen recovered ‘pieces of hands, heads, and arms.’ Vincenzo,

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<sup>116</sup> Fishermen also came from Mazzara del Vallo (Sicily). They often used Lampedusa as a base to fish in the Mediterranean (Ben-Yohayada 2016).

the old cemetery gatekeeper, knew it very well, because he was the one who welcomed on land the boats that retrieved the corpses at sea, and helped transferring them to his three-wheel car, and then to the cemetery. Vincenzo had seen many dead people in his life, but he had been particularly moved by the corpses of young migrants retrieved at sea since 1996. He was embittered by the death of so many people, 'and all so young', he said, 'without a reason', because for Vincenzo, aside from a dysfunctional government and a bizarre political situation, there was not a valid reason that could explain what he had experienced in the past decades.

Vincenzo's work as a cemetery gatekeeper, allowed him to meet migrants from a very close distance, but only when they were already dead. The first corpses of migrants that he remembers, were retrieved in 1996 and buried in two squares of land in the cemetery of Lampedusa, appositely created to host the migrants.

'They were all from twenty-five to thirty years old', Vincenzo said.

'Could you recognize their faces?' I asked.

'Yes, they were in good condition', but other times, the features of migrants' corpses were deformed by the days spent inside the seawater. 'Their skin', Vincenzo said, 'becomes all white, you know?', because this is what happens to human bodies: 'they become all white', all the same. If indifference and intolerance against the migrants appeared as a widespread common trait of many tourists and locals in Lampedusa, people like Vincenzo showed a marked sense of duty towards the migrants. 'Nobody helped me bury them [the migrants' corpses], because there was a terrible smell when I went to take the bodies on the fishing boats. There was nothing at that time, no Coast Guard ships, no nothing, not even the centre [CPSA] was there.'

Many in Lampedusa run for cover when the first migrants' corpses were retrieved and brought to land in 1996. People were not used to experiencing that, and the 'smell', as Vincenzo remarked, was unbearable (See Chapter 2). Nowadays, about twenty years later, tourists and locals enjoyed the beach, complained about the presence of the migrants on the island, and carefully kept a distance from them. For a good part, they seemed to generally maintain a distance from strangers, especially when a contact with them felt as a threat to their comfort zone.

But, when faced with migrants' corpses retrieved by fishing boats and brought to shore in the past decades, Vincenzo acted differently. 'I was the first, alone, to risk to get infected. Do you know what it feels like, to go on boat, grasping people's bodies, whose legs and heads fall on the floor, a horrible smell, and you know how many fish there were inside them, all white?' Vincenzo explained that what he did was not part of his job. In the late 1990s, when undocumented migration was not financially supported and managed as it has become, everyone had to do what he or she could. 'When I saw those dead people, please tell me, I could let them be, sure, but what did Jesus say? What you would

do to yourself, do it to your brother. And then, how could I say no? To later go to Church? It would be a contradiction.'

Unlike many locals who went to Church and showed indifference towards the migrants, Vincenzo felt that he could not turn his back to them, after what they had been through. He told me about a journalist who interviewed him some years before, asking why he had placed a number of wooden crosses on the ground where more than eighty migrants had been buried since 1996 (See Chapter 2). 'We are in a Christian cemetery here', was Vincenzo's response. 'Crosses are a sign of respect for the dead. However, now Jesus does not mind about it, because the dead [migrants] are already in Paradise.' For Vincenzo, the cross was a sign of respect and care for the dead, whoever they were, and from wherever they came from. He did not know what migrants' religious belief was, but by posing a cross on the graves, he wanted to make a statement: 'Dead people are all the same.' Vincenzo claimed it with strong tones. Unlike what he believed, in the cemetery of Lampedusa, the dead were not treated equally. Undocumented migrants lay without an identification number, a name, or a date, in mass graves, with the exception of some. Locals, instead, were regularly placed on marble tombs, with a picture and a memorial phrase.

'You see' Vincenzo said. 'This one is a Frenchman, but he is not an immigrant', not an undocumented immigrant. The Frenchman was buried in the right square of land where the undocumented migrants had been buried, but unlike all the others, he had a marble grave, with his name on it. Vincenzo pointed to a spot where a cross and a few flowers lay, next to the grave, and said, 'There is a woman here, a beautiful woman, and so young. She was almost alive when I saw her.' Vincenzo did not know where she came from, but he was concerned about one important issue: 'if someone would search for her, how would he know where she is? There are no numbers, no names, no dates on these graves.'

'Nothing catalogued?' I asked.

'There is nothing anymore.' Vincenzo said. 'I can tell you that there are fourteen here', pointing to a space of land, 'and two over there', pointing somewhere else. 'I told Nicolina<sup>117</sup> [the mayor] to make a marble monument, like a war Memorial. If we really love immigrants, we must not forget them, and I will never forget what I went through together with these persons.'

Once again, love emerged as a form of care for others. But in Vincenzo's experience, there was a further element of love: it both concerned life and death. In 2016, the mayor of Lampedusa Giusi Nicolini, was carrying out her political battle for Lampedusani's rights and the global recognition of migrants' political and human rights. Vincenzo felt threatened by her words, as well as the loving

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<sup>117</sup> In Lampedusa it was common to address people with nicknames or modified version of their official names. Giusi Nicolini was for Vincenzo 'Nicolina.' The use of a modified name, as in the case of Vincenzo, shows a willingness to play around with the political and social individuality of the person involved.

words of many politicians in Italy, who spoke openly about Italy and the EU's urgency to acknowledge the migrants as human beings. On the other hand, the cemetery of Lampedusa fell in a state of growing abandonment, and his calls for making order among the dead corpses of the migrants, kept being dismissed by the institutions.

If one observes the picture (See Figure 12), behind the monument installed, lush wild vegetation occupies one of the squares of land where more than eighty migrants have been buried since 1996. On the other square of land, on the left side, a second phrase, quoted from Italian writer Cesare Pavese, was written on a marble stone. It said: 'I don't know what world lies on the other shore of the sea; each sea has another land, and I will land.' The quote summarizes the struggles for moving towards a better future, faced by all migrants who landed in Lampedusa. The wild grass and flowers that grew covering also the left square of land, gave to the observer a strong sense of abandonment, as if they stood there purposely, to confirm that sadly enough, the migrants who were buried somewhere beneath the vegetation, failed to accomplish their dreams, and landed down there, dead, and covered by grass. Interestingly enough, on the back of a chapel pictured in Figure 13, a sign warned that it was forbidden to abandon waste, in respect of the dead, the cemetery, and the people who came paying a visit to their loved ones and friends. However, the two major spaces of the cemetery dedicated to the migrants, had been abandoned for months by the local institutions, and even the crosses posed by Vincenzo as signposts for where the migrants were buried, disappeared under the vegetation. Vincenzo told me, 'If we really love immigrants, we must not forget them', but as the artist and co-founder of Askavusa Giacomo Sferlazzo had once confessed with bitter tones, 'in Lampedusa, people have no memory. That's the problem.'



**Figure 12. Monument for the dead migrants buried in the cemetery of Lampedusa. 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2017**



**Figure 13. Marble stone with Cesare Pavese's quote in memory of the dead migrants buried in Lampedusa.**

### Bridging unequal worlds

For Vincenzo, however, the state of things at the cemetery was unacceptable. He confessed to me that when he retired, he began dreaming of the dead at night. 'Every night they come to visit me, every night I dream them, you understand? I can't take it anymore, it's too much.' Sense of guilt, or incapability to accomplish what one ought to do and plans for, as Sigmund Freud's interpretation of dreams may suggest? The interpretation of dreams is a 'tricky business'. In Islam, for example, the practices of dream interpretation 'is extremely sophisticated' (Edgar 2006: 270). I will not attempt to give a detailed interpretation of Vincenzo's dreams, but I will take them as a clue to further make sense of his daily struggles to deal with social, political, and existential inequalities: the unjust death of people, mostly very young, whom he met as already dead, and towards whom he felt the need to act with care. Dreaming of the dead was for the old cemetery gate-keeper an attempt to keep a relationship with people who had already been abandoned by International governments, human rights organizations, and by the institutions in many ways, both in life and after their death. He had met many dead migrants, treating their bodies with care, and burying them with dignity. In dreaming them every night after his retirement, as Vincenzo explained to me, he had found a way of establishing a contact with the dead outside the place of work. His willingness to be there for them was manifest in his dreams; spaces of inter-relation between life and death. Vincenzo's dreams then became transcendent worlds where earthly indifference could be overcome. He dreamt of migrants, but also

Lampedusani and old friends, and by doing so, he treated everyone as equal, because for Vincenzo, ‘there is no black or white, souls are souls, and they must be treated as such, with respect and care.’

Love raised through Vincenzo’s account as a form of respect towards others, legal and illegal, alive and dead. Hannah Arendt (1958) theorized love as that force which makes the interspace between two lovers disappear, as it does not take count of the other’s past, holding on to forgiveness, and dismissing historicity, to some extent. Her take on love led her to write that love could be considered as one of the most anti-political forces in the human realm. However, Arendt (1958) seems to dismiss that Love, precisely because it does not operate on the basis of social, legal, historical, or political differences, it becomes one of the most effective anti-indifference responses. Love, as opposed to indifference, emerged in Vincenzo’s account as a deep sense of communion with the dead souls, migrants and Lampedusani alike. It manifested itself as a force moved by an urge to treat people as equals, at least in death, within a political and social context where indifference, intolerance, and incomprehension determined a distance between the migrants, the locals, and the tourists.

Vincenzo had learnt that although equality could not be accomplished in life for the many migrants, he could still do something about it. Dreaming the souls, talking to them, praying for them every day, and visiting the cemetery were practices of acknowledging the dead migrants. Vincenzo kept fighting against local institutions, trying to improve the conditions of the cemetery, and to some extent, he had managed to do so. He made wooden crosses for the dead migrants, and he could now appreciate the monument dedicated to them in 2017. He was aware that he could not turn local and global political indifference into Love, and his dreams became both a possibility to interact with the dead, but also a reminder that the souls of the migrants still required attention, care, and memory. ‘I get up early every day, and after Church, I walk to the cemetery, to visit them [the dead], because they need it.’ Perhaps, Vincenzo needed it as much as he thought that the souls of the dead would need his presence, but in either ways, his love for the migrants allowed him to actively do something for them, rather than leave them in abandonment. This is the outcome of Love, as I explored it in this chapter: to act upon one’s urge or need to acknowledge people as different and yet inevitably same to us (Jackson 2013b). As long as Vincenzo was concerned, much more work was required for them to find peace, and he would have kept doing what he could, until they did.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I addressed the concept of Love as a human quality which concerns people’s capacity to deal with political, legal, economic, and existential tensions, to face social inequalities, political absence, or bureaucratic indifference, in order to respect, care, and acknowledge others. As a human

quality, Love concerns ‘the personal or individual’ as possessing this quality, but it does not emerge equally and in the same ways through all human interactions (Josephides 2014: 2). In fact, it often leaves space to its opposite, indifference, which is the absence of a relationship with the Other, ‘the rejection of common humanity’ (Herzfeld 1992:1). Both indifference and Love emerge as personal strategies for dealing with the Other; in other words, a coping mechanism to both deal with one’s worries and concerns (Josephides 2014). The Other, or the foreigner, as Kristeva argues, ‘is within me’, and ‘hence we are all foreigners’; but ‘If I am a foreigner, there are no foreigners’ (Kristeva 1991:192). If locals suffer from the dysfunctional management of undocumented migration in Lampedusa, and tourists tend to preserve their comfort zone, projecting what they have learnt about the migrants through indifferent or intolerant behaviours towards them, migrants try to smile back at indifference, as they have learnt to do during their life. Other times, they are already dead, buried in ‘mass graves’, by the cemetery of Lampedusa.

Within such political, social, cultural, economic and existential inequalities, the concept of Love emerges as a response to indifference, and a tendency to recognize the common grounds which makes us all humans. Acts of love, as I have described them through this chapter, do not represent a solution to political, economic, legal, and existential disparities among migrants, locals, and tourists. Rather than being a resolution of differences, Love emerges as a need, or a willingness to acknowledge the Other, being the white tourist or the African migrant, the alive or the dead. As opposed to indifference, Love allows to bridge the gap between different worlds, without necessarily making them the same, but by establishing an interaction. As Mrs. Maria suggested during our conversation, it is a means for comprehending others, or for attempting to establish a relationship of mutual understanding, acknowledgment, and respect.

Life at the border is ultimately demarcated by people’s tendencies to struggle for what they ought to give to others, and what they need to preserve for themselves. Forms of indifference and acts of love cross each other and clash with one another. As I have shown in this chapter, the former, is capable of destructing human relationships. It can determine distance among people, reducing others to categories, people to labels, and experiences to ideas, images, or reasonably sounded interpretations of others’ *lifeworlds*. As Herzfeld (1992) argues, indifference is born out of a tendency to blame the institutions or the State for their fallacious management of local or global phenomena, a justification to one’s feel of powerlessness towards political, social, and legal injustice. However, as it is argued in this chapter, blame of others can operate as a factor for the production of social indifference. It can also determine opposite reactions among the people, pushing them to achieve what the State, or the institutions, failed to accomplish. Here, Love, emerges as a gesture, a smile, or a sign of care, reducing distances and calling for establishing an intimate space among people.



Hannah Arendt (1958) argues that love is also indifferent, but towards diversities; it does not take count of others' qualities, properties, limits, or transgressions, because it destroys the intermediate space between the two lovers. In understanding love as a stranger to the world, and 'perhaps one of the most anti-political human forces', Arendt (1958) however dismissed a fundamental aspect of it: Love opens up possibilities of human interaction within spaces of politically, economically, socially, or culturally determined indifference. As Josephides (2014: 24) suggests, 'human beings everywhere are both transcendent and social: transcendent as individuals because only individuals engage in encounters with the other, and social because this is the condition of their everyday lives'. The nature of such relationships, and the willingness to reject them, or the need to find ways of establishing them within unfavourable political, social, or economic contexts, is at the core of Love, whose accomplishment, like a world-making project, 'though not quite the labour of Sisyphus'<sup>118</sup>... is at the very least uncertain' (Ibid. 24-25). In the light of the uncertain character of human relationships, and therefore of Love, it should perhaps not surprise us that despite some inhabitants of Lampedusa showed Love towards other — finding their own strategies to overcome the gaps between political absence, religious moral precepts, and unequal life situations — inequalities and indifference still emerge among migrants, tourists, and locals' everyday interactions. Within a socially, politically, and economically unequal context, compassion and empathy could become threats to what one mostly cared about; a good time on holiday, a prolific touristic season, or one's health. On the other hand, some inhabitants of Lampedusa responded by the means of Love, acknowledging others' concerns, opening up to them, and letting them in their private space, while attempting to enter others' *lifeworlds*. The concern for the migrants' situation during the protest in May shown by some locals, the positive attitude of many migrants towards the tourists, and finally, the Vincenzo's care for the dead migrants, were manifestations of Love. As such, they demonstrate that when a smile became the prerogative of being with others, and respect of the stranger won over indifference, a further step towards comprehension was achieved among the inhabitants of Lampedusa. As Mrs. Maria had wisely said, such comprehension would require time: time to learn that after all, it was all about love.

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<sup>118</sup> In Greek mythology Sisyphus was King of Ephyra (Corinth). He was punished by Zeus by being forced to roll a heavy rock up a hill for it to roll down again, so that he had to eternally repeat this action. The figure of Sisyphus is thus often associated to futile and repetitive attempts to obtain something which cannot be obtained.



## Conclusion

Words require care. The stories we tell, the narratives we tend to reproduce, the messages we carry with our baggage of experiences, and the kinds of realities we give voice to, need a particular attention, because they have a specific weight in the lives of some people, and they can effectively affect them. We must use care when we exhibit others' *lifeworlds*; their pain, suffering, joy, frustration, fear and hope. Such exhibition can be a dangerous one, as it carries the risks of authorship in the name of others' voices. It can expose the individual, delicate, and existential experiences of some people to misunderstanding, critique, abuse, and to the (re)production of political action or public narratives aimed at damaging, rather than comprehending and easing others' suffering. Among many other situations of injustice, violence, abuse, suffering, and economic and political crime, the context of undocumented migration is one where words must be very carefully calibrated. Each move must be pondered, and it needs an important dosage of self-criticism, to attempt reducing the uncountable risks of misunderstandings.

At the Venice Biennale (of 2018-2019), artist Christopher Büchel designed an installation of the capsized boat which sank off the coasts of Libya on 18<sup>th</sup> April 2015, causing the death of an estimated 700 passengers (Figure 14). The name of the installation was "Barca Nostra" (Our Boat), also named 'the boat of innocents', a powerful title which highlights the injustice of condemning to death hundreds of people whose sole crime was to be born as people who are not allowed to move freely, and thus, according to law, shall not do so. The exhibition of the salvaged wreck in Venice caused admiration, criticism and alarm among many artists and writers. Those in admiration, wrote that the installation was a powerful reminder of the ongoing tragedies which occur in the Mediterranean Sea within a general sense of indifference, acceptance, and widespread ignorance and incomprehension of the complexity of the phenomenon of undocumented migration. Although the act of exhibiting a piece of the otherwise lost memory of death in the Mediterranean is a powerful and important gesture, the lack of information and critical background supporting the installation, let the migrant boat sink again into a space of critical and political absence. The Italian photojournalist Max Hirzel, whose project on the identification of migrant bodies in the Mediterranean will be showcased at Sink Without Trace in London, stated that 'When you pass from information to a form of celebration, there's a risk that it will become a monument of sorts to European compassion: so that we can feel sympathetic, getting emotional in front of his boat' (Bromwich 2019). The risk to call for a common sense of shame, without however creating the background understanding of the phenomenon, can determine a stasis in the public perception of the world: as if there was a part of

this world to be pitied and felt sorry for, and another part who can develop their personality and interests freely and without oversight. This is what the migrant boat exhibited at the Venice Biennale seems to tell us about the reality of migration. As discussed in Chapter II, the Memorial Day of the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October in 2016 portrayed in a similar way a broken world, divided by a definite line into human and inhumane, selfish and charitable. As I show in the thesis, on this memorial day, mayor Nicolini was publicly calling for a state of emergency in Lampedusa, holding on the tragic events of the shipwreck of the 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2013. A group of survivors from the 3<sup>rd</sup> October was invited to take part to the memorial ceremony, but their presence was, similarly to “Barca Nostra”, a kind of silenced exhibition of pain. During the memorial ceremony in October 2016, there were women crying on the floor as the priest on stage prayed for the victims, and H., an Eritrean migrant who survived the shipwreck, publicly read a letter to his dead brother. The event was emotionally touching. It certainly recalled the tragic event of the shipwreck, and the suffering it determined. Yet, by doing so without providing a comprehensive set of information, and by excluding most survivors and direct witnesses of the tragedy, it became a violent act.



Figure 14 “Barca Nostra”, by Christopher Büchel

As both the Venice Biennale case and the memorial commemoration of the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October suggest, the exhibition of someone’s suffering, often comes with a loss. To exhibit is by definition the act of

bringing out something. In the specific situations of violence, torture, or death experienced by many migrants who cross the Saharan desert, are kept in compounds under no legal protection, and navigate the Mediterranean in unseaworthy conditions, exhibiting is the act of bringing to the surface a set of intimate experiences which concerns others. Doing so, requires time, effort, and the willingness to absorb others' words, gestures, stories, silences. It requires the willingness to meet people who are experts, who know more than we do about the business of migration, the sufferings it involves, the uncertainties and ethical dilemmas it produces, and the absurdity it carries. The migrant boat exhibited at the Venice Biennale is voiceless, as it says nothing about the individual lives, names, and experiences of the migrants who died, or those who survived the shipwreck. We have no information on who they were, what their perception of such tragedy might be, or what they might have to add to the artist performance. What would Ismail, Izack, Mohammed, or Rasta, think of it? How would they read it? What would they have to add from their personal knowledge of the phenomenon of undocumented migration? Most of them now live abroad. They escaped from the Temporary Stay Centres several months after leaving Lampedusa. They moved to France or Germany, where they got small jobs, learnt the language, waited for their documents. Some studied hard because they want to succeed in life, go back to their own countries in Africa, and do business there. Others have spent the last couple of years in Temporary Stay Centres, waiting for their documents, going to Italian classes, playing football, and looking for a job they could not find. The "boat of innocent people" may help us reflect upon the dead in the Mediterranean. In the meantime, what is left of those who survived? Where are they, and how do we understand, discuss, and make sense of their daily existence?

If on the one hand, the act of exhibiting the migrant boat tells us that the people who died in that shipwreck did not disappear completely from the public memory, the installation suggests something more urgent and dramatic. Despite the exhibition, current politics in Italy and Europe, are drastically pushing for exclusion, closing their ports and securing their borders. They signed agreements with Libyan authorities to prevent clandestine migration by keeping the migrants in prison like detention centres where they suffer from torture, rape, severe violence of other kinds, and death (IOM 2018). The crystal of hypocrisy shines on its surface, where we are reminded of the most fundamental principles of being human and respecting others as human beings, and on the other hand, it hides a core of violence, injustice, and death.

Hence, one may wonder, is there a space for artists, writers, and academics, to bring out someone else's pain, to exhibit critically and thoroughly the tragic events that others have experienced? The answer is not straightforward. The uncertain nature of the dilemma is well captured by a conversation I had with craftsman Francesco Tuccio, and boat master Peppe Top, during a

morning of March 2017, a month before I finished fieldwork. Peppe Top<sup>119</sup> was working on a boat which would be part of the installation produced by Sicilian artist Rossella Vasta. Peppe explained to me that ‘the boat has been commissioned for a project on Peace. Because, as you know, we are all for peace here.’ And he laughed. The art work was commissioned by the Ministry of Culture for the Ara Pacis in Rome, as part of a project to which Rossella Vasta had previously worked in Japan and the United States, called “Table of Silence” (Figure 15). ‘We are for peace, but we make wars. We sell weapons, we even build them, but what most matters is the word, isn’t it?’ Peppe Top carried on. ‘We are pacifists.’ The boat master was glad to work on the boat for the Ara Pacis, but he was also well informed on the RWM, the weapon factory in Sardinia which produces bombs and other weapons, famously known for furnishing Saudi Arabia and bombarding Yemen. Peppe Top felt intimately that the line between critically trying to reconstitute a collective memory, and falling in the trap of exploiting others’ suffering, was liable. Tuccio, on the other hand, did not agree with Peppe Top. He claimed that ‘This project is the result of a positive idea. The people who worked on it had no personal interests. It is a project aimed at sensitizing precisely the political figures who are not doing what they should.’ But Peppe Top had answered: ‘Here is the hypocrisy. You, not you Tuccio, but you the government, on the one hand keep producing bombs, and on the other hand you give funding to projects on peace, to sensitize people and to remember? Well, either you are a dick, or an imbecile. Or, you are trying to be cunning.’ As it happens for any attempt to tell a story, to make a claim, to transliterate some kind of experience by the means of writing, painting, or music, making mistakes is possible, and failing someone’s expectations is nearly inevitable, in a way or another. Yet, as Tuccio ultimately responded to the reflection of Peppe Top, ‘It’s not a kind of work based on reason. It is something born out of a deep anger, a sense of great suffering, the tears I cried when I saw what I saw... the memories of those mothers who cried beside me, as I took the dead bodies of the children, dead, there, with my hands.’ Tuccio became the craftsman of migrants’ crosses and is now well known across the world. He exhibited a piece of art figuring a cross made out of the woods of migrant boats collected in Lampedusa at the British Museum, in London. His work was born out of suffering, as he said, but it was most importantly moved by a deep sense of care for the dead children he recovered from the sea. Tuccio did not exhibit others’ suffering. He rather brought out his own emotions, his sense of lost, his feel of melancholy and frustration for what he experienced. He was an artist, and as Peppe Top did, he tried to find a language to communicate such pain to others.

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119 Nickname for boat master and artist Giuseppe Balestrieri.



**Figure 15** Mare Internum/Table of Silence

Self-criticism is primary to any form of expression which is aimed at capturing the less visible, spoken, and often the least accepted and easily acceptable kinds of words, life situations, economic and political forms of violence, abuse, and abandonment. Yet action comes with errors, and each effort must carry its own mistakes. There is no ideal, perfect, and objectively faultless form of storytelling, of communication, or representation of the realities that we tend to refer to as the phenomenon of illegal or undocumented migration. Each attempt to tell a story will come with its own losses and voids. I nevertheless believe that it is precisely through the act of expression, of exhibition, of publication and representation of complex sets of experiences, that we could have a chance of comprehension. In pursuing such goal, care must be our companion.

For the old cemetery gate-keeper Vincenzo, having care for the migrants meant to do all one could in life, to remember what happened to the dead. In 2018, a group of women in spiritual pilgrimage visiting the island, donated a statue to the Comune di Lampedusa, to be installed at the cemetery. The art work was produced by a local woodcraft artist, Francesco Tuccio. The statue represented the bow of a boat, made out of real migrants' boats recovered by the cemetery boat in Lampedusa by the local artist, two wooden crosses, and a blue wooden frame on which was written: 'In this place rest Muslims and Catholics, old and young, black and white; all migrants who died at sea, in the search of freedom. This monument is symbol of hope, born despite all tragedies taking place in the Mediterranean Sea, and the freedom given to all people.'

Within the current climate concerning the issue of undocumented migration, a gesture for the migrants might be regarded as the use of others' suffering and pain, moved by individualistic concerns, rather than based on a real interest for augmenting someone else's wellbeing. In this thesis I tried not to focus particularly on the personal intention behind people's gesture, but rather, I focused on the relations which these gestures produce, and the existential value they carry with them, being able to turn a space of abjection into one of mutuality, and a state of exception into the ground where reciprocal acknowledgment is possible. It is through small gestures that the intricate web of interest, profit, and lucrative abuse of the most vulnerable people, can be penetrated. When such movements towards other people are ignited by a sense of mutuality, a spirit of acknowledgment, and a will to let the voices of those who have been silenced echo in the public arena, exhibition becomes condemnation, and moralism becomes ethics. As the words of Tuccio clearly suggest, it is necessary to open up to people, to listen and engage with them; to question what we assume being real or not real, right or wrong, good or bad. As a result, we may come to the realization that what one ultimately brings out, or exhibits, is far less definite, clear, and certain, than what one might have planned to do. Such space of uncertainty and doubt is the force that moves research forward, opening up previously unthinkable possibilities, and providing the grounds for further engagement in the topic.

## There ain't a Conclusion

Life in borderlands is ultimately about struggling for survival; surviving political absence and its outcomes, one's sense of guilt for having to choose between what one perceives as right, and what one is inclined to do<sup>120</sup>. This work shows that life in borderlands consists of extraordinarily ordinary choices; it shows that living is about being; being blind to others' suffering or acknowledging their pain, being empathic or showing indifference. In other words, life in Lampedusa exemplifies the intellectual struggle between the Cartesian philosophical cosmos, where the *I* determines the behaviour towards *others*, and the Arendtian cosmos, where the *I* always exists in relation with *another*, and with how we live in the world (Jackson 2013b). Life on the island is entwined with a self-reproductive system which generates more suffering, anger and incomprehension among migrants, migration workers, and locals, allowing the business of undocumented migration to grow albeit in multiple forms. Faced with such situations, borderland situations, everyone responds as she or he can.

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<sup>120</sup> Survival has multiple meanings; it can be financial survival, that is to encroach on someone's rights, taking empathy as a threatening possibility of giving away what one ought to keep for oneself. Also, survival can be about ethics, thus it has to do with acting upon one's sense of duty as a professional worker and a good person, which often clash with one another.

In the song '*Una conclusione non c'è*<sup>121</sup>', the Lampedusano singer and poet Giacomo Sferlazzo undertakes a project of re-evaluation of truth, and he constantly challenges appearance as a merely partial form of reality. After all, there is no ultimate or definite closure but rather a comprehension, or assumed so, of the superimposed layers of reality that constitute Lampedusa as the theatre of the absurd. Here, the spectacle of the border (De Genova 2004) — within and beyond the stage of migrant landing — shows its most powerful contradictions. In dwelling on these multiple attitudes of being with others, this work contributes to the debate on migration by critically stating the limitations of the notion of the '*homo sacer*', 'the spectacle of the border', and the 'state of exception'. It does so by means of a phenomenological approach which can be inscribed in the field of existential anthropology. A study of the borderland of Lampedusa, 'a zone that is not merely geographical or political' as it 'defines an existential situation of being betwixt and between, of struggle and suffering' (Jackson 2008: 377), must be carried out in respect and awareness of a determining factor: we are all, as human beings, exposed to ethical dilemmas, personal uncertainties, doubt, as well as the capability to acknowledge others or to dismiss their existence, importance, or claims. I found it necessary to state in my methodological chapter that, within fieldwork, ethics was mostly about a life process, a necessity to understand others' *lifeworlds*, and a resistance to allow others' doubts and pain to disturb my own. As for the migrants, the locals, and the migration workers, I also needed to re-evaluate where I was standing ethically, what I was doing consciously, on whose side I was placing myself. This seemed to change constantly, as each situation arose, each choice was taken, and each relationship was established. In order to address this uncertain sense of being torn between reason and instinct, personal concern and urge to do something valuable for others, I will briefly refer to how Giorgio Agamben understands the Myth of Er in relation to his work on ethics.

In his last work, the '*Use of Bodies*', Agamben (2016) refers to the Myth of Er to critically engage with different interpretations of how, according to Plato, before reincarnation, souls arbitrarily choose their future way of life or believe they are doing so. The Myth suggests that each individual differs from others according to personal parameters, and yet every one of us chooses, more or less consciously, the kind of life they will be reborn into. On a first reading of the myth, such choice appears arbitrary. However, Agamben (2016) further reflects upon the details of the myth to argue that choice, rather, grows out of particular contingencies: experiences constituting the individual, given contexts, interrelations with the surrounding world and those who live in it, establishing relationships or choosing not to. Agamben here thinks through the lens of intersubjectivity, arguing that ultimately, we do not really choose by action, thought, self-reflection, and experience what will be of our present and future life, because what we do is the outcome of our intersubjective existence.

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121 "There ain't a conclusion."



It is precisely in the intersubjective space that the answer to my research question can be found. Thus, I asked if the migrant can be solely recognized as a bare life, the migration worker as the mirror of exclusive sovereign power, and the local as a welcoming character. Each chapter has added elements contributing to my response; each inhabitant of the island is never the sole expression of one or more political, legal, economic or mediatic discourses, but rather a person, whose way of seeing, acting, thinking, and living in relation to others, is always influenced but with very diverse outcomes. In fact, if some project their 'poisoned selves' (See chapter VI) into the image of migrants, others instead recognize the often-dangerous outcomes of indifference, intolerance, and violence for human relationships. Hence, they attempted to find alternative ways of establishing personal contact with others, rather than falling under the false illusion of exclusion, which leads to legal, political or economic separation and categorization. Ethics thus emerges in this work as the relationship between particular contingencies and people's personal responses to these in each given situation (Carrithers 1995; Jackson 2013b; Josephides 2014).

Despite their diversities, each story I present is in fact about people who share the human need to alleviate suffering and augment a sense of well-being (Jackson 2005). This is not always possible, and in practice there is often an unbridgeable gap between what they felt they ought to do, and what they are capable of doing. This thesis has focused precisely on describing how such a gap binds the inhabitants, workers and migrants, showing how they are very different yet very similar human beings. Searching for a resolution to difficult situations is a human characteristic; when we recognize the suffering involved in overcoming an obstacle, there is a meeting point, a moment of encounter, where we have a chance to acknowledge our sameness. Each situation and particular condition of mutual acknowledgment is variable. However, in each case we must not understand life only as a form of survival which crushes others.

From Latin, the word survival is etymologically formed by two terms, '*vivere*' (to live) and '*super*' (above/over). To live above is often understood in the terms of Darwinian survival of the fittest, an evolutionary theory which still describes a great part of human behaviour at the present time. However, to live above or to survive can also mean to overcome the urge to expand at the expense of others' suffering, and to thus reduce the social, legal, political and economic distance which often determines the exclusion of some and the inclusion of others. I have referred to the various expressions of the latter form of survival as Love. Some people in Lampedusa taught me that the practice of Love is possible regardless of the circumstances. It can arise precisely as a response to unfavourable situations, and therefore, it does not obey the logic of sovereignty and the paradigm of the state of exception by all means. It is not an obvious assumption and it should not be taken for granted. Love, as I use the term in this work, and specifically in Chapter VI, is a complex and never



complete form of opening up to the people who live with us. It is the will to comprehend those who may appear incomprehensible, and to allow strangers in. It is a skill which goes beyond the idea of equality, that grows out of small gestures, embodied in some migrants' smiles, in the presence of migration workers, and in the care manifested by many locals. In spite of the contingencies, the system, the structure and circumstances that make Lampedusa the realm of the absurd, these people showed that despite everything, Love is possible.

## Theoretical contribution

As I entered fieldwork, I soon noticed that everyone on the island of Lampedusa — from the migrants who had gone through such terrible experiences, to the locals who showed no concern for the migrants' lives — manifested frustration, hope, melancholy, and dissatisfaction. To capture these tensions, and to address everyone's struggle to improve their life conditions, I employed the notion of 'existential aporia' (Jackson 2013b: xiii). Accordingly, migrants, migration workers, and locals, all to different extents and from different perspectives, found themselves stuck between what they ought to do and what their possibilities allowed them. Rather than focusing on what made the migrants 'bare lives', I thus began exploring how the migrants faced their life-situations, and what made their responses the same as or different from the migration workers and locals' everyday struggles. The differences, surprisingly, if one considers literally the paradigm of the '*homo sacer*,' often showed that in Lampedusa there were migrants who faced their life in the borderlands by having hope for the future, reciprocity, and openness towards others. Conversely, many of the locals and some of the migration workers, who were able to sleep in their own houses rather than being detained inside a CPSA in unreasonable hygienic conditions, often failed to find valid solutions to their difficult situations. Some locals preferred to project their fears onto the image of the migrants. Some migration workers treated the migrants as work objects, refraining from any personal consideration or emotional relationship.

The industry of undocumented migration produced a richly varying landscape of different responses to existential situations. The absurd character of the illegality industry portrayed by Andersson emerged in its most contradictory forms. Yet, the dysfunctional and business-oriented management of the phenomenon of undocumented migration, did not reveal how people ordinarily made sense of it, worked through its fallacies, attempted to overcome its limitations, and lived with its various forms of violence.

As I have stated in chapter II and III, through memorial ceremonies for the dead migrants, and media representations of migrant landings, Lampedusa has become publicly known to the world by the tropes of the tragedy and the emergency. In light of it, the historical, archival, and ethnographic material presented in the thesis contributes to the wider anthropological and sociological debate on the spectacular or theatrical production of borderlands in contexts of emergency. It does so by ethnographically describing particularly telling moments, like the memorial ceremony of 3<sup>rd</sup> October, or the migrant landings, which have become fundamental events in constructing the ‘spectacle of the border’. Shifting perspectives of observation, and moving across space and time, it unravels how these extraordinary events speak or fail to address the everyday life of migrants, locals, and migration workers.

By critically exploring the gaps left between media representations of the frontier, and everyday life in borderlands, this work contributes to the anthropological critique on ‘contemporary states of emergency’ (Fassin and Pandolfi 2010). It highlights how in the context of undocumented migration, emergency has become a key term to constitute states of exception where both the humanitarian and securitarian discourses often emerge as facets of the same coin: profit at the expense of the most vulnerable people. To a further extent, this thesis contributes to the anthropological process of deconstruction of the border spectacle, giving voice to migrants, locals, and migration workers’ multiple narratives, life experiences, and ethical dilemmas. When migrants tell their stories of subjugation, violence and denigration suffered across their journey to Europe, and the subsequent bureaucratic incarcerations in Lampedusa, migration workers explain their difficulties in being part of a system which treats migrants as ‘non-persons.’ At the same time, as locals respond to political absence by projecting their fears onto the scapegoated image of the migrant, the uncertain character of life in borderlands emerges as opposed to any fixed and simplified category.

Andersson (2012: 274) concludes his work on the industry of illegal migration in the Mediterranean by stating that ‘The illegality industry is like a sledgehammer that fails even in its basic task of cracking a nut. Attempts to combat illegality only generate more illegality.’ In light of it, this thesis further explores how dysfunctional the ‘illegality industry’ is by focusing on the malfunctioning CPSA of Lampedusa, and the concerns and worries reported by many migration workers, migrants, and locals. However, it further pushes this notion of the absurd already captured by Andersson to an existential direction, showing that the unsound characters of the illegality industry determine surreal life-situations for locals, migrants, and migration workers. Endurance by the means of hope in a better future and alternative strategies of coping with the absurd, is often the only way of facing life at the border.

Drawing from existential anthropology, in particular as a response to Jackson's (2008: 378) claim that 'all lives and *lifeworlds* are more complex and variable than is suggested by the paradigmatic discourses of both the academy and the popular media', this thesis gives ethnographic and theoretical substance to migrants, migration workers, and locals' life experiences. It attempts to describe where they diverged from one another, and how they converged together. The result, as each chapter shows, is a continuous re-evaluation of taken for granted expectations, and an opening up towards reconsidering common assumptions, labels, categories, and relationships across political, economic, legal, historical, intimate, and physical spaces. Uncertainty and willingness to find a reason for the absurd character of the business of undocumented migration make everyone human, but human in very different ways. Everyone's position, action, and choice depend on contingencies, chance, personality, possibility, but ultimately, they depend on the capability of acknowledging or dismissing others, to deal with one's own sense of the absurd by either projecting one's fears onto other people, or by attempting to solve them through acts of sharing and reciprocity.

## Situating the research in the current context

In the current political context, the EU constantly refers to the issue of undocumented migration as an urgent dilemma, which must be faced with responsibility, in respect of human rights and financial, economic, and political needs. In the summer of 2018, the Italian Minister of the Interior Matteo Salvini chose to 'close the Italian ports' to the undocumented migrants travelling by boat. Such political claim was broadcasted as a statement of power: Italy was not going to welcome any more undocumented migrants coming from the Mediterranean Sea, unless the EU guaranteed an equal distribution of the migrants among the EU state members since the moment of their landing. Europe responded by warning Italy: the actions undertaken by the Italian government did not comply with the most basic human rights principles. The decision of forbidding migrants' entry to the Italian ports has left dozens of migrants at sea for weeks, on a boat equipped to rescue them, but not to host them for such a long time. Children, women, and men, waited on board of the ONG Aquarius, to finally be welcomed by Spain after more than a week. Their lives were literally at the mercy of political choices which, as Agamben (1998) predicted, turn some people's lives into 'bare lives', whose existence becomes a political and economic issue. In the summer of 2018, while Salvini's diatribe with the EU was taking place, the CPSA of Lampedusa was officially closed. Yet, groups of Tunisian migrants kept reaching the island on board of vessels. It must be noticed that following Mare Nostrum (Naval and air operation for rescuing migrants in the Mediterranean) in 2013, migrants' boats were

intercepted before reaching land, and people were transhipped to NGOs or government rescue ships. The arrival of Tunisian migrants by boat in Lampedusa in summer 2018, converged with a particular moment of the ‘spectacle’ of undocumented migration in the Mediterranean: the closure of the Italian ports and the State battle against NGOs. As a result of a political closure towards the arrival of undocumented migrants by the Maltese and the Italian governments, there has been a drastic disappearance of NGO rescue ships in the Mediterranean Sea. Once again, as it once happened for the fishermen of Lampedusa who rescued migrants at sea, welcoming undocumented migrants has become a political and legal crime. NGOs like the Pro Activa Open Arms have been accused of favouring undocumented migration, considering that their role as non-profit-organization made up of volunteers has been that of attempting to fill a gap left by the EU: to contribute to rescue operations after Mare Nostrum ended, in the awareness that thousands of migrants kept dying at sea. Pro Activa Open Arms was a Spanish NGO which directly transferred migrants to Lampedusa. Its captain, Riccardo Gatti, in October 2018 wrote that the Italian government left the NGOs uninformed of migrants’ boats in distress (Per I Diritti Umani 2018). Their only source of information was the Colibrì airplane, provided by the French NGO Pilotes Volontaires. As a result, Riccardo Gatti reported, rescue operations were not optimized, and the obligations ordered by the International Human Rights Conventions: to inform the nearest operating unit of a vessel or boat in distress to immediately provide aid. As a result of an often-ambiguous political situation, the only operative NGO rescue ship in the Mediterranean is currently the Sea Watch. I was back in Lampedusa in May 2019. On 9<sup>th</sup> May, the Sea Watch team rescued about thirty migrants, and one hundred more were disembarked in Lampedusa the following day. As this happened, Salvini kept going to Italian talk shows to ensure Italians that ports were closed to undocumented migrants. The media barely mentioned what happened in Lampedusa, Italians were happy to hear that in Italy, undocumented migration, which many perceived as ‘the cancer of our times’, was being defeated.

Within a growing political tension, where closure and indifference towards the life-situation of undocumented migrants develop, this work contributes, perhaps even more urgently than a few years ago, to critically reflect on how the phenomenon of undocumented migration determines people’s lives, and in turn emerges as the product of how they face its contingencies. The thesis reveals that everyone who lives and has lived at the border of Lampedusa struggles to face the social, economic and political outcomes of the phenomenon of undocumented migration, because the glitch is in the system itself. The illegality industry is absurd, firstly because it often moves against the goals it claims to work for (Andersson 2014). It determines human suffering, when it claims to reduce it. It reproduces exclusion within a system which proposed to be inclusive. It pushes people’s ethical sense to the limit, determining distance among individuals by giving them a role, a name, and an unequal

share of freedom. It is born out of the necessity to save lives, but it works within the paradigms of self-profit and economic interest. The absurd character of undocumented migration impacts on everyone's life in Lampedusa. Yet, among the migrants, the locals, and the migration workers, someone fights for the acknowledgment of a dead brother. Someone else shows its humanness by endurance and hope, despite his humanity being disrespected and violated during the journey to Lampedusa. Others live the role of migration workers by acting upon the logic for which people's well-being is prior to any political, economic, or legal discourse going against it. The absurd character of the illegal industry rests on the discrepancies between what each person is called to suffer, accept, or obey to, and each one's personal need to recognize oneself into the other. Our reciprocal recognition as people is not a prerogative of a historical context, a political moment, a social condition, or a cultural aspect. It is rather a prerogative of being human. In claiming to explore how borderlands can provide particularly challenging and telling political, social, economic, historical, and existential spaces to further explore the struggles, coping mechanisms, strategies of survival, fears and hopes that make up for our human existence, that is always same and different from other individuals, this thesis may have taken other directions. I will briefly outline some of these before concluding.

Firstly, in light of an ethical debate which concerns how people encounter one another in limit-situations, it would be interesting to explore what happens on board of rescue boats in the Mediterranean. That is, how doctors respond to the emergency of people who are drowning, how the presence of dead corpses impacts on the rescue team's experiences, and how it affects migrants' *lifeworlds* after they have been saved. Adrenaline and the need to operate were, according to doctor Jacopo and Coast Guard Agent Luca, imperative necessities which stopped one to think, and forced one to act during the rescue operations at sea. Further, in consideration of the broad literature on borderlands (Gatta 2012; De Michelis 2017), migration (Lucht 2011; Jackson 2008), and people on the move (Andersson 2014), Lampedusa offered an ideal field site to further reflect upon migration from multiple perspectives. In this thesis, I have extended the present ethnographic knowledge on borderlands, migration and 'people on the move' by describing the existential condition, or life-situations of all inhabitants on the island, and the varied ways in which the phenomenon of undocumented migration influenced their *lifeworlds*, and often left moral scars in their memories. In light of it, further research may explore how the migration of objects, stories, and emotions, could help us to further comprehend the complexities of people's lives and life-situations. In particular, the boat cemetery of Lampedusa, and the museum of lost migrants' objects collected by the collettivo Askavusa could provide two fundamental spaces to reflect on how objects, stories, and emotions,

travel, get lost, are collected, interpreted, and made alive again, through different practices, like storytelling, music, and art exhibitions.

Lastly, this thesis provides a solid ethnographic description of extraordinary and everyday life in Lampedusa which, to my personal understanding, only introduces some of the topical issues that a reader needs to know if he or she is going to critically understand migrants, locals, and migration workers' struggles to live in borderland situations. Political absence, social indifference, self-interest, as well as reciprocity and Love, are fundamental aspects of how people related to one another. In this thesis I could only introduce such notions in terms of some people's experiences, offering a taste of the social, economic, legal, political, and existential contexts where they took place. Further research is needed to explore the multiple aspects of Love and indifference as they arise in everyday life, focusing on individual stories of the inhabitants. Let's take Nino for example, the co-founder of the Archivio Storico di Lampedusa, who taught Italian to many young migrants in the summer of 2016. There were particular moments where the Historical Archive turned into a space of mutuality, learning, joy, hope, and action, silently but efficiently, unofficially but effectively. The possibility to establish such spaces of encounter among inhabitants of the island and undocumented migrants are further elements which could contribute to understanding how the interplay of agency-cum-patency formed and transformed throughout space and time in Lampedusa. Furthermore, future research could explore more in detail, the varied responses that migrants had when reaching Lampedusa, because although many of them smiled and tried to show their positive attitudes towards life, many others had lost their smile, and never exited the CPSA. These 'others' I could only know by migrants and migration workers' stories, but I never met them. Doing fieldwork inside the CPSA would allow to touch by hand, that is to experience from migration workers and migrants' perspectives what a 'dysfunctional system consists of', and what particular moments make detention the condition of being 'non-persons', or the possibility of sharing a good time with others. The limitations of this thesis were nonetheless related to the fact that most of the people I met and spent time with were male, especially among the migrants. This is primarily due to the fact that among the travellers who landed in Lampedusa, there was a high ratio of male versus female, but also, it was a gender related limitation. Very few women exited the CPSA, and among them, many had suffered sexual violence in Libya, and tended to remain silent when I approached them in groups. Opening up with a male figure was probably difficult a priori, because as a woman, one may feel not fully comprehended by a man in the intimately pervasive experience of sexual violation, and as it often happens, the bitter sense of carrying a baby who was born out of violence and not out of love. Perhaps it was one of the reasons why women researchers like D., who did fieldwork in the Medical Centre of Lampedusa in 2016-2017, represented a more familiar and trustworthy figure than I could possibly be at that time.

The copious number of books, articles, and research projects funded by national and international organizations constitute the solid foundations for a critique of the phenomenon of undocumented migration, but they mostly did not reveal the complexities of life in borderlands; the existence of each person through his or her everyday struggles. Perhaps, underlying the human character of the phenomenon of undocumented migration could appear simplistic or reductive to the reader. However, after revealing the business upon which the illegal industry of migration rests, and its most absurd ways of reproducing itself, little has changed both at the local and at the global level. Displacing or exhibiting the complex dynamics, contradictions, and hypocritical situations determining what we call ‘the phenomenon of undocumented migration’ and being able to observe how these both determined and are produced by the various people who are subjected to it, is necessary for change. Yet, focusing on the dysfunctional aspects of the system is only one aspect of the story. Reality in borderlands speaks different languages, tells various stories, and nurtures very distinctive and often unsound, absurd, and contradictory narratives. On the one hand, fear, anger, and profit proliferate, and like tentacles reach for many people. On the other hand, within the realm of practice and sharing, by being together, breathing, looking around, smiling; in spaces like the CPSA, where migration workers and migrants live in close proximity, some can foster isolation, indifference, and self-interest. As Arendt (1958) argues in reference to Lessing, within the space of the ‘camp’ that is systematically constituted for non-action, passivity, exclusion, self-profit and the well-being of the whole system rather than the persons who live in it, ways out have to be found humanly — by activating oneself in dialogue and reciprocity, as people are capable of doing. When it happens, we are facing acts of Love. These leave a perfume of beauty, a memory of happiness, a smile which can ignite the contingent sense of a dark era, where sparks of light exist.

## List of shorthand terms

**CPSA:** Centro di Primo Soccorso e Accoglienza

**EASO:** European Asylum Support Office

**FRONTEX:** European Border and Coast Guard Agency

**Hotspots:** Centers on the borders of the EU aimed at registration, photo-identification and fingerprinting of the disembarked migrants within 72 hours maximum of arrival.

**INMP:** National Institute for promoting the health of Migrants' populations and for contrasting Poverty related diseases).

**IOM:** International Organization for Migration

**MH:** Mediterranean Hope

**UNHCR:** United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees



## Sicilian and Italian Glossary

Below a list of some Sicilian and Italian terms that appears frequently in this thesis. Definitions or translations will appear in a footnote only in the first instance it is used. Terms which are only used once are explained using a footnote in the relevant page and do not appear below.

- Singular followed by plural (when relevant).

Example: Lampedusano, Lampedusani

Carabinieri: National gendarmerie of Italy primarily carrying out domestic policing duties.

Centro: In some instances, term used to refer to the CPSA (Centro di Prima Accoglienza) in Lampedusa. The word may also be used for city center (island center).

Clandestino, Clandestini: Italian of Illegal immigrant, commonly used with negative connotations.

Mancia: To eat, in Sicilian dialect.

Operatore, Operatori: migration workers.

Ospite, Ospiti: Literally guests. Term used to address migrants detained at the CPSA in Lampedusa.

Turchi: Turks. The term has generally negative connotations. In Sicilian dialect and also in Italian language it is often used to stereotypically and generically refer to immigrants from Africa and the Middle East.

Straneri: Strangers, in Sicilian dialect.

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